



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 1 APR 2022

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	04/01 Recall: Ford vehicles
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/ford-recalls-737k-vehicles-to-fix-oil-leaks-trailer-brakes/
GIST	<p>DETROIT (AP) — Ford is issuing two recalls covering over 737,000 vehicles to fix oil leaks and trailer braking systems that won't work.</p> <p>The oil leak recall includes the 2020 through 2022 Ford Escape SUV and the 2021 and 2022 Bronco Sport SUV with 1.5-Liter engines. A housing can crack and oil can leak onto engine parts, which can create a fire hazard.</p> <p>Dealers will replace the housing if needed. Owners will be notified starting April 18.</p> <p>The trailer braking recall includes F-150 pickups from 2021 and 2022, as well as the 2022 F-250, 350, 450 and 550. Also covered are the 2022 Maverick pickup, and Ford Expedition and Lincoln Navigator SUVs.</p> <p>A software error can stop trailers from braking, increasing the risk of a crash.</p> <p>Dealers will update brake control software. Owners will be notified starting April 18.</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Recall: GM SUVs
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/gm-recalls-nearly-682000-suvs-windshield-wipers-can-fail/
GIST	<p>DETROIT (AP) — General Motors is recalling nearly 682,000 compact SUVs because the windshield wipers can fail.</p> <p>The recall covers the Chevrolet Equinox and GMC Terrain from the 2014 and 2015 model years.</p> <p>Ball joints in the wiper module can rust, causing one or both wipers to fail, increasing the risk of a crash.</p> <p>Dealers will inspect the module and repair or replace it if needed. Owners will be notified by letter starting May 2.</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Economy adds 431,000 jobs in March
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2022/04/01/labor-march-jobs-report-joe-biden/2631648815739/
GIST	<p>April 1 (UPI) -- A month after shattering expectations on Wall Street, the Labor Department on Friday underwhelmed just a little bit with its March jobs report -- showing about 60,000 fewer than expected.</p> <p>The department issued its monthly labor assessment and said the U.S. economy added 431,000 jobs last month. Most economists expected the report to show around 490,000 new hires.</p> <p>Friday's report also showed that the national unemployment rate in March declined to 3.6%.</p> <p>"Notable job gains continued in leisure and hospitality, professional and business services, retail trade and manufacturing," the department said in its assessment.</p> <p>A month ago, the department blew away analysts' expectations by reporting close to 700,000 new jobs in February. Although it slightly missed expectations this month, experts agree that the report shows the job market on stable footing. In fact, the unemployment rate and number of unemployed are close to what they were before the start of the COVID-19 era two years ago.</p>

	<p>"The unemployment rate declined by 0.2 percentage point to 3.6% in March, and the number of unemployed persons decreased by 318,000 to 6 million," the report noted. "These measures are little different from their values in February 2020 (3.5% and 5.7 million, respectively), prior to the coronavirus pandemic."</p> <p>On Wednesday, ADP and Moody's Analytics reported that the private sector created 455,000 jobs in February -- down from the past two months, but still hovering around the half-million mark.</p> <p>Worker mobility continues to hover near all-time highs this year. The Labor Department said earlier this month that more than 4 million U.S. workers quit their jobs in February with 11.3 million job openings.</p> <p>On Thursday, the department said that there were about 202,000 new unemployment claims last week, a slight increase from the week before.</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Russia gas still flows into Europe
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-gas-keeps-flowing-europe-despite-putins-deadline-pay-roubles-2022-04-01/
GIST	<p>IRPIN, Ukraine, April 1 (Reuters) - Russia allowed gas to keep flowing to Europe on Friday despite a deadline for buyers to pay in roubles or be cut off, and peace talks resumed, with Moscow saying it would respond to a Ukrainian offer.</p> <p>An order by President Vladimir Putin cutting off gas buyers unless they pay in roubles from Friday had caused alarm in Europe, where it was seen as Moscow's strongest card to play to retaliate for Western financial sanctions. Germany, the biggest buyer, rejected the demand as "blackmail".</p> <p>But pipelines were pumping as normal on Friday. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said the decree would not affect shipments which were already paid for, only becoming an issue when new payments were due in the second half of the month.</p> <p>"Does this mean that if there is no confirmation in roubles, then gas supplies will be cut off from April 1? No, it doesn't, and it doesn't follow from the decree," Peskov told reporters.</p> <p>Negotiations aimed at ending the war resumed by video link, even as Ukrainian forces made more advances on the ground in a counterattack that has repelled the Russians from Kyiv and broken the sieges of some cities in the north and east. Russia said progress was being made in the talks and it would respond to a Ukrainian peace proposal delivered earlier this week.</p> <p>The Red Cross said it had been barred from bringing aid in what would have been the first humanitarian convoy to reach the besieged port of Mariupol, but still hoped to be able to organise the evacuation of residents by bus.</p> <p>After failing to capture a single major Ukrainian city in five weeks of war, Russia says it is pulling back from northern Ukraine and shifting its focus to the southeast, including Mariupol.</p> <p>'EVERLASTING FEAR'</p> <p>Russia has painted its draw-down in the north of Ukraine as goodwill gesture for peace talks. Ukraine and its allies say the Russian forces have been forced to regroup after sustaining heavy losses due to poor logistics and tough Ukrainian resistance.</p> <p>Irpina, a commuter suburb northwest of Kyiv that had been one of the main battlegrounds for weeks, is now firmly back in Ukrainian hands, a wasteland littered with burnt-out tanks.</p>

Volunteers and emergency workers were carrying the dead on stretchers out of the rubble. About a dozen bodies were zipped up in black plastic body bags, lined up on a street and loaded into vans.

Lilia Ristich was sitting on a metal playground swing with her young son Artur. Most people had fled; they had stayed.

"We were afraid to leave because they were shooting all the time, from the very first day. It was horrible when our house was hit. It was horrible," she said. She listed off neighbours who had been killed - the man "buried there, on the lawn"; the couple with their 12-year-old child, all burned alive.

"When our army came then I fully understood we had been liberated. It was happiness beyond imagination. I pray for all this to end and for them never to come back," she said. "When you hold a child in your arms it is an everlasting fear."

The governor of the Kyiv region, Oleksandr Pavlyuk, said on Friday Russian forces had also withdrawn from Hostomel, another northwestern suburb which had seen intense fighting, but were still dug in at Bucha, between Hostomel and Irpin.

Further north, Russian forces have withdrawn from the site of the Chernobyl former nuclear power plant, although Ukrainian officials said some Russians were still in the radioactive "exclusion zone" around it.

Over the past 10 days, Ukrainian forces have recaptured suburbs near Kyiv, broken the siege of Sumy in the east and driven back Russian forces advancing on Mykolaiv in the south.

In the latest Ukrainian advance, Britain's Ministry of Defence said on Friday Ukrainian forces had recaptured villages linking Kyiv with the besieged northern city of Chernihiv.

RED CROSS AID BLOCKED

Friday's video peace talks picked up from a meeting in Turkey on Monday, where Ukraine offered to accept neutral status, with international guarantees for its security.

The Ukrainian proposal would put off discussion of Russia's territorial demands, including Crimea, which it annexed in 2014, and the Donbas which it demands Ukraine cede to separatists.

"We are preparing a response. There is some movement forward, above all in relation to the recognition of the impossibility of Ukraine" joining NATO, Russia's Lavrov said on Friday. He said there is a "lot more understanding of another reality. I mean the situation in Crimea and Donbas".

Putin sent troops on Feb. 24 for what he calls a "special military operation" to demilitarise Ukraine. Western countries call it an unprovoked war of aggression and say Putin's real aim was to topple Ukraine's government.

Russia now says it has turned its focus to the Donbas, a southeastern area where it has backed separatists since 2014. Russia's biggest target in that area is Mariupol, where the United Nations believes thousands of civilians have died under a month-long siege, suffering relentless bombardment without access to food and water supplies, medicine or heat.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said a convoy it had organised had been denied permission to bring aid into Mariupol. It did not say who had refused permission.

Spokesperson Ewan Watson said the convoy of buses had set off for Mariupol on Friday without the aid supplies, in the hope of reaching the city to evacuate trapped civilians. Ukraine has blamed Russia for refusing to allow any aid to reach the city.

	A fuel depot in the Russian city of Belgorod near the Ukraine border caught fire, and the regional governor said it had been hit by two Ukrainian helicopters in what would, if confirmed, be Ukraine's first known airstrike on Russian soil. Ukraine's defence ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Russian oil firm Rosneft, which owns the depot, reported the fire without identifying the cause.
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HEADLINE	04/01 Federal jury awards \$14M to protesters
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/death-of-george-floyd-police-george-floyd-lawsuits-michigan-23dff0aa2a476a1cf2a1eb4b267b637d
GIST	<p>DENVER (AP) — A federal jury’s \$14 million award to Denver protesters hit with pepper balls and a bag filled with lead during 2020 demonstrations over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis could resonate nationwide as courts weigh more than two dozen similar lawsuits.</p> <p>The jury found police used excessive force against protesters, violating their constitutional rights, and ordered the city of Denver to pay 12 who sued.</p> <p>Nationwide, there are at least 29 pending lawsuits challenging law enforcement use of force during the 2020 protests, according to a search of the University of Michigan’s Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse.</p> <p>The verdict in Denver could give cities an incentive to settle similar cases rather than risk going to trial and losing, said Michael J. Steinberg, a professor at the University of Michigan Law School and director of the Civil Rights Litigation Initiative. It could also prompt more protesters to sue over their treatment at the hands of police.</p> <p>“There’s no doubt that the large jury verdict in Denver will influence the outcome of pending police misconduct cases brought by Black Lives Matter protesters across the country,” said Steinberg, whose law students have been working on a similar lawsuit brought by protesters in Detroit.</p> <p>Lawyers for the claimants argued that police used indiscriminate force against the nonviolent protesters, including some who were filming the demonstrations, because officers did not like their message critical of law enforcement.</p> <p>“To the protest of police violence they responded with brutality,” one of their attorneys, Timothy Macdonald, told jurors.</p> <p>People who took part in the protests have already made similar allegations in lawsuits filed across the country.</p> <p>In Washington, DC, activists and civil liberties groups sued over the forcible removal of protesters before then-President Donald Trump walked to a church near the White House for a photo op. The claims against federal officials were dismissed last year but a judge allowed the case against local police to continue.</p> <p>Several lawsuits alleging protesters were wrongfully arrested or that police used excessive force have been filed against New York City and its police department, including one brought by New York Attorney General Letitia James that claims police used excessive force and wrongfully arrested protesters. In Rochester, New York, people who protested the death of Daniel Prude, a Black man who lost consciousness after being pinned to the street by officers during a mental health call in 2020, claim police used extreme force against them in a lawsuit that also alleges city officials have allowed a culture of police brutality against racial minorities to fester.</p> <p>One of their attorneys, Donald Thompson, said he plans to raise the Denver award in settlement talks with the city and note that unlike most of the Denver protesters, some of his clients suffered lasting injuries including the loss of an eye and scarring from being hit in the face with a tear gas canister. Thompson also thinks the Denver verdict shows that the public, in the age of cellphone and body camera videos, is not as willing to give police the benefit of the doubt anymore.</p>

“Now people see how this policing really works. You can’t be naïve,” he said.

A spokesperson for Rochester did not return a call and an email seeking comment. When the case was filed, the city said it had already revised the way police responds to protests.

Over the last two months, the city of Austin, Texas has agreed to pay a total of \$13 million to four people who were hit in the head with bean bag rounds fired by police.

Even before the Denver ruling last week, the police department made some changes in response to criticism that arose from the protests, including eliminating the use of 40mm foam rounds for crowd control and changing the way officers are permitted to use pepper balls.

Denver’s Department of Public Safety, which includes the police department, said in a statement that the city was not prepared for the level of sustained violence and destruction. During the trial, lawyers and witnesses said over 80 officers were injured as some in the crowds hurled rocks, water bottles and canned food at them.

The department said it continues to evaluate its policies to “better protect peaceful protestors while addressing those who are only there to engage in violence.”

Still, the large award is not expected to lead to an overhaul of how officers respond to what experts say are inherently chaotic situations that are difficult to prepare for.

Ed Obayashi, a use-of-force consultant to law enforcement agencies and a deputy sheriff and legal adviser in Plumas County, California, said society may have to bear the cost of such settlements because innocent people can be injured during protests as outnumbered police try to react on the fly, including to people intent on violence.

“It really goes south in an instant because there are individuals out there who want to cause chaos,” he said.

Obayashi said there is not much police training for protests, which have been relatively rare. He said it would be prohibitively expensive to have officers practice deploying equipment such as tear gas canisters. Because projectiles used in crowds and considered “less lethal” by police, such as rubber bullets and pepper balls, have less velocity and less power to hurt people, it is harder to ensure they hit their intended target, he said.

Lawyers representing people who have also alleged police misconduct and violation of their constitutional right to protest can now use the Denver damage award as part of their own settlement negotiations, said Mark Silverstein, legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, which represented some of the winning Denver protesters.

The decision came nearly two years after thousands of people angry about Floyd’s death took the streets nationwide, a relatively quick result for the legal system and soon enough for others who allege misconduct by police to file a claim. In Colorado and many other states, there is a two-year statute of limitations for such lawsuits Silverstein said, leaving only a few months for others to sue.

The city attorney’s office said it has not decided whether to appeal the verdict, but appeals in such big cases are common, said Gloria Browne-Marshall, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Outside lawyers will also scrutinize the case to try to determine if there are unique circumstances that may have led to a “lightning in a bottle” verdict that is less likely to be repeated.

However, she thinks the verdict sends a significant message that regular people respect the right of protest and demand change from the government, which she believes police and prosecutors have been undermining.

	“It should send a message to both, but whether or not they listen is a different issue,” Browne-Marshall said.
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HEADLINE	04/01 Africa refugees: political racial bias
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-immigration-africa-ohio-middle-east-e36828f28316641670a507b384019a39
GIST	<p>Wilfred Tebah doesn't begrudge the U.S. for swiftly granting humanitarian protections to Ukrainians escaping Russia's devastating invasion of their homeland.</p> <p>But the 27-year-old, who fled Cameroon during its ongoing conflict, can't help but wonder what would happen if the millions fleeing that Eastern Europe nation were a different hue.</p> <p>As the U.S. prepares to welcome tens of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing war, the country continues to deport scores of African and Caribbean refugees back to unstable and violent homelands where they've faced rape, torture, arbitrary arrest and other abuses.</p> <p>“They do not care about a Black man,” the Columbus, Ohio, resident said, referring to U.S. politicians. “The difference is really clear. They know what is happening over there, and they have decided to close their eyes and ears.”</p> <p>Tebah's concerns echo protests against the swift expulsions of Haitian refugees crossing the border this summer without a chance to seek asylum, not to mention the frosty reception African and Middle Eastern refugees have faced in western Europe compared with how those nations have enthusiastically embraced displaced Ukrainians.</p> <p>In March, when President Joe Biden made a series of announcements welcoming 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, granting Temporary Protected Status to another 30,000 already in the U.S. and halting Ukrainian deportations, two Democratic lawmakers seized on the moment to call for similar humanitarian considerations for Haitians.</p> <p>“There is every reason to extend the same level of compassion,” U.S. Reps. Ayanna Pressley, of Massachusetts, and Mondaire Jones, of New York, wrote to the administration, noting more than 20,000 Haitians have been deported despite continued instability after the assassination of Haiti's president and a powerful earthquake this summer.</p> <p>Cameroonian advocates have similarly ratcheted up their calls for humanitarian relief, protesting in front of the Washington residence of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and the offices of leading members of Congress this month.</p> <p>Their calls come as hundreds of thousands in Cameroon have been displaced in recent years by the country's civil war between its French-speaking government and English-speaking separatists, attacks by the terrorist group Boko Haram and other regional conflicts.</p> <p>The advocacy group Human Rights Watch, in a February report, found many Cameroonians deported from the U.S. suffered persecution and human rights violations upon returning there.</p> <p>Tebah, who is a leading member of the Cameroon American Council, an advocacy group organizing protests this month, said that's a fate he hopes to avoid.</p> <p>Hailing from the country's English-speaking northwest, he said he was branded a separatist and apprehended by the government because of his activism as a college student. Tebah said he managed to escape, as many Cameroonians have, by flying to Latin America, trekking overland to the U.S.-Mexico border and petitioning for asylum in 2019.</p>

“I will be held in prison, tortured and even killed if I am deported,” he said. “I’m very scared. As a human, my life matters too.”

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees TPS and other humanitarian programs, declined to respond to the complaints of racism in American immigration policy. It also declined to say whether it was weighing granting TPS to Cameroonians or other African nationals, saying in a written statement only that it will “continue to monitor conditions in various countries.”

The agency noted, however, that it has recently issued TPS designations for Haiti, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan — all African or Caribbean nations — as well as to more than 75,000 Afghans living in the U.S. after the Taliban takeover of that Central Asian nation. Haitians are among the largest and longest-tenured beneficiaries of TPS, with more than 40,000 currently on the status.

Other TPS countries include Burma, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen, and the majority of the nearly 320,000 immigrants with Temporary Protected Status hail from El Salvador.

Lisa Parisio, who helped launch Catholics Against Racism in Immigration, argues the program could easily help protect millions more refugees fleeing danger but has historically been underused and over-politicized.

TPS, which provides a work permit and staves off deportation for up to 18 months, doesn’t have limits for how many countries or people can be placed on it, said Parisio, who is the advocacy director for the Catholic Legal Immigration Network.

Yet former President Donald Trump, in his broader efforts to restrict immigration, pared down TPS, allowing designations for Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea in West Africa to expire.

Although programs like TPS provide critical protections for vulnerable refugees, they can also leave many in legal limbo for years without providing a pathway to citizenship, said Karla Morales, a 24-year-old from El Salvador who has been on TPS nearly her whole life.

“It’s absurd to consider 20 years in this country temporary,” the University of Massachusetts Boston nursing student said. “We need validation that the work we’ve put in is appreciated and that our lives have value.”

At least in the case of Ukraine, Biden appears motivated by broader foreign policy goals in Europe, rather than racial bias, suggests María Cristina García, a history professor at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, focused on refugees and immigrants.

But Tom Wong, founding director of the U.S. Immigration Policy Center at the University of California, San Diego, said the racial disparities couldn’t be clearer.

“The U.S. has responded without hesitation by extending humanitarian protections to predominately white and European refugees,” he said. “All the while, predominately people of color from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia continue to languish.”

Besides Cameroon, immigrant advocates also argue that Congo and Ethiopia should qualify for humanitarian relief because of their ongoing conflicts, as should Mauritania, since slavery is still practiced there.

And they complain Ukrainian asylum seekers are being exempted from asylum limits meant to prevent the spread of COVID-19 while those from other nations are being turned away.

	<p>“Black pain and Black suffering do not get the same attention,” says Sylvie Bello, founder of the D.C.-based Cameroon American Council. “The same anti-Blackness that permeates American life also permeates American immigration policy.”</p> <p>Vera Arnot, a Ukrainian in Boston who is considering seeking TPS, says she didn’t know much about the special status until the war started and wasn’t aware of the concerns from immigrants of color. But the Berklee College of Music sophomore hopes the relief can be extended to other deserving nations.</p> <p>Arnot says TPS could help her seek an off-campus job with better pay so she doesn’t have to rely on her family’s support, as most in Ukraine have lost their jobs due to the war.</p> <p>“Ukrainians as a people aren’t used to relying on others,” she said. “We want to work. We don’t want welfare.”</p> <p>For Tebah, who is staying with relatives in Ohio, TPS would make it easier for him to open a bank account, get a driver’s license and seek better employment while he awaits a decision on his asylum case.</p> <p>“We’ll continue to beg, to plead,” Tebah said. “We are in danger. I want to emphasize it. And only TPS for Cameroon will help us be taken out of that danger. It is very necessary.”</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 West spy agencies weaponize intelligence
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/01/politics/western-spy-agencies-intelligence-putin-ukraine-war/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Western intelligence agencies are waging a psychological war over Ukraine directly with Russian President Vladimir Putin, an expert at the genre, who is now effectively taking a dose of his own medicine.</p> <p>The United States and its allies are painting a picture of a bogged down, demoralized and dysfunctional Russian military taking disastrous losses on the battlefield, and are simultaneously conjuring a vision of growing political tension inside the Kremlin. They claim the Russian leader is isolated, poorly advised and lacking real intelligence on just how badly the war is going.</p> <p>Western governments are preventing Putin from defining the narrative of the war -- just as they did before it began, when their declassified intelligence correctly called an invasion many geopolitical experts thought was unlikely.</p> <p>It is a tough position for a Russian leader who has often deployed information warfare himself, notably while meddling in US and European elections. The remarkable detail of the declassified intelligence assessments must also be especially galling to Putin, a former KGB officer and intelligence chief. And they leave open the possibility that Western intelligence agencies have the capacity to see deep into the Kremlin's war effort and internal politics, which is likely to infuriate the Russian leader and could open further cracks in his regime.</p> <p>The willingness of Western governments to be so open about what they are seeing inside Ukraine and Moscow has surprised even some veteran spies.</p> <p>"It makes intelligence professionals, even former ones like me, nervous, because, of course, it's so ingrained in us to protect sources and methods," Steve Hall, former chief of Russia operations for the CIA, told CNN's Ana Cabrera Thursday.</p> <p>Part of the intrigue about the US showdown with Putin and the intelligence angle is being fed by the nature of the covert community itself. Outsiders have no way of independently assessing the full accuracy of the information being pushed into the public view by their leaders. So we don't know where it's all coming from or from whom. But of course, that's the point, and it's keeping the Russians guessing too.</p>

The attempt to portray the war in Ukraine as a disaster for Russia is coming at a moment when Western officials are discounting Moscow's claims that it is deescalating the conflict in Kyiv and elsewhere.

Instead, they say, Putin's forces are ["repositioning"](#) -- possibly for an intensified assault in eastern Ukrainian regions where Moscow has been pummeling civilians and razing cities. Such a tactic could be designed to unite Russian-held areas with Crimea, which Putin seized in 2014, and to give Moscow a direct corridor to the Black Sea through Ukraine.

The inside story of the war

In recent days, Western officials have sketched a remarkable portrait of the war.

In Australia on Monday, one of Britain's top spy chiefs, Jeremy Fleming, said that Putin had "massively misjudged" the war, the resistance of the Ukrainian people and his own military's capacity, and had been poorly served by his subordinates.

"We've seen Russian soldiers -- short of weapons and morale -- refusing to carry out orders, sabotaging their own equipment and even accidentally shooting down their own aircraft," said Fleming, who heads GCHQ, the UK's equivalent of the National Security Agency. Fleming's frankness was extraordinary coming from a leading espionage agency chief. But it is being mirrored in the United States where there were new reports on Wednesday that opened a window into the war and Putin's inner circle.

An official told [CNN's Jeremy Diamond](#) that Putin is being "misinformed" by advisers about how badly the Russian military is performing and the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy. White House communications director Kate Bedingfield then said on camera that the Russian leader's advisers were "too afraid to tell him the truth." She said there was now a "persistent tension" between Putin and his military leadership.

On Wednesday, this new stream of declassified assessments made headlines. On Thursday, President Joe Biden was asked about them in a public setting, as officials presumably knew he would be. The sequence gave the President the chance to further amplify the US narrative.

"There's a lot of speculation," Biden said, though of course that speculation had been driven by information that the White House had allowed into the public domain. Asked how badly Putin was being misinformed by his advisers, Biden replied, "I'm not saying this with a certainty -- he seems to be self-isolating, and there's some indication that he has fired or put under house arrest some of his advisers."

While Biden said that the US didn't have that much hard evidence, his comments unleashed a whole new torrent of attention on Putin's current situation.

So what exactly are Western governments trying to do with this novel use of declassified intelligence assessments? Especially given that in many previous geopolitical crises, intelligence was kept secret by routine?

As with the pre-invasion messaging, it's clear that the US does not want the Russians to be able to create a dominant narrative of their own about the war through disinformation. Creating a picture of a failing war also helps maintain support for the tough Western stand against Putin. It may also improve morale among Ukrainians who are resisting Russia's onslaught. And it gives Western leaders a political opening to argue their policies are working as they manage public opinion on the war.

By providing a look into the disarray among Russian troops, the allies may be able to build internal political pressure on the Kremlin. Given the Moscow government's crushing of independent media, there will be few illusions that the Russian people will hear the US version of events, though tech-savvy younger Russians with VPN passwords allowing access to foreign internet services might.

But a drumbeat of humiliation for Russia could further sow discord inside the military, political and intelligence elites. In recent days, it has almost seemed as though Western officials, by discussing the situation in the war so openly, have been trying to address Putin and his advisers directly.

The complications of an intelligence-driven strategy

It's unlikely the intelligence stream will dry up any time soon. That's because it seems to be rooted in a morale problem inside Russian armed forces, which became obvious thanks to eavesdropping.

"They're whipping out their cell phones and trying to communicate with each other, both tactically, 'Where are you? Where's your unit?' and perhaps also back home in Moscow. That makes it really easy to collect," Hall said.

"And then, it's an interesting political decision to say, look, it's worth perhaps showing the Russians how good we are at collecting this stuff, in order to get the word out to citizens of both countries, citizens of the world, as to what's really going on in the Russian military right now," Hall added.

"It's an interesting decision, but it's been very illuminating."

Still there is reason for caution in interpreting the war solely based on the West's declassified assessments. Intelligence, by definition, is a murky business. The information about the Russian operations in Ukraine and the apparent isolation of Putin in Moscow only tell the outside world what the Western intelligence services want to release. There is, therefore, no way for outsiders to know whether these snapshots give the full picture or a more selective one.

And the information that does filter out is still limited. An official cited by CNN's Diamond and Kevin Liptak on Wednesday declined to provide additional details of Putin being misinformed by his advisers other than what was reported. The intelligence community declassified and downgraded a summary of their findings but not the material itself.

As always, intelligence agencies are taking strenuous steps to avoid identifying their sources and the methods that were used to collect the intelligence.

There have been multiple times in recent American history -- for example, before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, when US intelligence assessments have proven to be faulty. In this crisis, however, the covert community has repaired some of its reputation. For weeks, the US warned that Putin was getting ready to send his forces across the Ukrainian border. Even the Ukrainians were skeptical.

Then hours before the invasion actually happened, the US issued a warning that the incursion was imminent -- and was proven correct.

Still, the problems encountered by the Russian invading force have surprised Western intelligence agencies and have caused a reassessment of assumptions about the supposed might of Russia's military forces and leadership.

The head of US European Command, [Gen. Tod Wolters](#), said at a Senate hearing this week that there could be an intelligence gap that led the US to overestimate Russia's strength and underestimate Ukrainian defenses.

But even that oversight only underscores the surprisingly poor performance of Russia's forces, and draws attention to it, further advancing the West's goals.

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HEADLINE	04/01 Belarusian battalion fights for Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/01/ukraine-belarus-fighters-russia/

KYIV — For more than a decade, Pavel Kulazhanka has sought to overthrow the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko in his native Belarus.

First, it was simple street protests. Then, sabotaging train lines and bombing military outposts. Eventually, he had to flee — and landed in New York City, where he became a mixed martial arts fighter.

Are you on Telegram? Subscribe to our channel for the latest updates on Russia's war in Ukraine. But he thinks the best shot yet at toppling Lukashenko — and Russian President Vladimir Putin, without whose support many in Belarus think Lukashenko would quickly fall — has come with the war in Ukraine.

He is one of hundreds of Belarusians who have joined the fight here, inspired by their neighbor's battlefield successes and determined to carry that momentum back into Belarus to end Lukashenko's 28-year rule.

Many of them have joined the "Kastus Kalinouski Battalion," named after the leader of Belarus's insurrection against Russia in the 1860s. It is made up of Belarusians taking advantage of Ukraine's wartime decision to allow foreigners to serve in the ranks of its armed forces, though not as officers. A dozen recruits interviewed by The Washington Post described their sense of common cause between Ukraine and Belarus's pro-democracy movements.

"Life is about leaps of faith," Kulazhanka said during a break this week from training with an AK-47 assault rifle in a western suburb of Kyiv. Around him, the sound of distant artillery fire rumbled through the air like a thunderstorm. "Fighting Lukashenko was one. Fleeing Belarus was another. Throwing away my life in America was one more. And fighting here, we are making the biggest one of all."

While Lukashenko's military has not yet joined Putin's in Ukraine, Russian soldiers have been based in Belarus since before the war began and launched their main ground offensive on Kyiv and northern Ukraine from there.

About 200 members of the volunteer battalion are serving on the front lines, including in Irpin on Kyiv's outskirts, where Ukrainian forces recently regained control, Kulazhanka and other recruits said.

They are funded and equipped mostly through donations from the Belarusian and Ukrainian diasporas, including in the United States. But the recent induction of the battalion into the armed forces has meant that some received guns and armor, including some supplied by NATO, from the Ukrainian military.

Those leading the recruitment effort say there are thousands more who have expressed interest, but vetting them and getting equipment has created a backlog. Many are dissidents who were arrested during protests against Lukashenko's 2020 election win, which they and international observers say was brazenly stolen.

In March, Vadim Prokopiev, a Belarusian restaurateur who has become one of the main organizers of Belarusian recruits from around Europe, met 14 of them at the Poland-Ukraine border before guiding them to a training site.

Only a few allowed their faces to be photographed and none agreed to provide their last names, saying that family members in Belarus could be targeted.

"Basically, there are two wings," Prokopiev said. "One in Kyiv already, and one in western Ukraine. Over here, we train recruits intensively for two weeks — everything from tactical matters to digital hygiene. Then they move east in small groups and make their way to the front lines."

Prokopiev said that out of thousands who had expressed interest from all over the world, only a hundred or so were currently in the pipeline. He said he expected more high-ranking defected officers to join soon, but for now most were untrained recruits.

While most said they had no prior combat experience, some said they have been at the receiving end of Lukashenko's brutality, which has imbued them with the spirit of revenge.

"I only spent three nights in prison during the 2020 protests," said Aleksandr, 38. "But it was enough to make me leave Belarus. I saw women begging not to be beaten, I saw a guy with long hair get scalped. They put 70 of us in a small cell. It was pure brutality, like we are enslaved people or animals. I'm fighting here because until we overthrow Lukashenko, I can't go back. Defeating Putin in Ukraine is the first step for both countries' freedom."

One of the recruits who crossed the border that day, also named Aleks, was a Belarusian passport holder but ethnically Russian. The 61-year-old, the oldest in the group, described himself as a freethinker and a proud Russian who wanted to show Ukrainians that not all Russians supported the war — in fact, there were some like him who would fight on their side.

"We have to prove that the Soviet mentality cannot last forever," he said. "Putin is against goodness, truth and freedom. He has opened old wounds. To heal them, unfortunately, we must fight, and it may take our lives."

Since the war in Ukraine began, Belarusian dissidents have warned that an invasion of Ukraine by Belarus's military is imminent. Ukraine's military has echoed those warnings and accused Russia and Belarus of staging small-scale attacks on Belarus as pretexts for a Belarusian invasion, though those allegations have not been proven.

"According to my sources in the military, battalions on the Belarusian side of the border are completely prepared for the invasion, they are just waiting for the word go," said Pavel Latushko, Belarus's former culture minister who defected to Poland a decade ago and has since organized protests, and now recruitment to Ukraine, from there.

"To me it is obvious why Lukashenko has not said go yet," Latushko said. "He is a master at self-preservation, and he knows that invading Ukraine may be the end of him. His soldiers' morale is zero for this war. They will defect in droves."

Lukashenko dismissed the battalion as "insane citizens" in a recent interview with Belarusian state-run media.

In Ukraine, however, hopes are high among Belarusian recruits that if Belarus's army invaded, its soldiers would seize the opportunity to defect, and their Belarusian battalion was ready to welcome them.

"We are already envisaging how to get Belarusian troops to defect into our ranks," said Sergey Bulba, who along with Prokopiev, leads recruitment and training efforts for Belarusians in Ukraine. "Many soldiers in the army already know in their hearts that the destinies of Belarus and Ukraine are bound to each other. As soon as they leave Belarus's propaganda bubble, they will know what they have to do."

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HEADLINE	03/31 Europe reassesses China relationship
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/31/eu-china-summit-ukraine-war-russia/
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS — Russia's attack on Ukraine has forced the European Union to rethink how it works with authoritarian regimes. Outraged by the war, the bloc feels deceived by Moscow's doublespeak and deeply remorseful it did not break ties sooner.</p> <p>That skepticism is expected to carry over into an E.U.-China summit on Friday — the first in nearly two years — as the E.U. recalibrates its relationship with one of its top trade partners.</p>

Before the war, the E.U. was slowly and somewhat reluctantly adopting a tougher stance toward China. The events of the past month — and Beijing's tacit backing of Moscow — have accelerated that shift, aligning the E.U. more closely with the U.S. position on China as a strategic adversary.

E.U. leaders plan to use the virtual summit to warn Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang against offering material support to Russia, whether with weapons or assistance in evading sanctions.

"Everyone will be watching to see how hard the Europeans press China," said David Shullman, senior director of the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub.

Chinese officials, meanwhile, have been surprised and dismayed to see the E.U. align so closely with the United States, especially on Russia sanctions, said a person familiar with official discussions in Beijing on the China-E.U. relationship.

"The Ukraine situation has definitely pushed E.U. thinking closer to that of the U.S. ... That will have negative outcomes for all parties," said the person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to reporters.

Ahead of the E.U.-China summit, Chinese analysts and official media outlets appear to be trying to peel Europe away from the United States — prodding the E.U. to exert its independence. State broadcaster CCTV wrote in an editorial Tuesday that Europe, "which has been repeatedly stabbed in the back by the United States," should not make the same mistakes and be "dragged into danger by the U.S."

Chinese leaders are seeking to preserve access to the E.U.'s trading market while being cautious not to cross Russia, their greatest strategic partner, Shullman said.

"They're going out of their way to try to convince friendlier European leaders that China is trying to play a positive role, without actually shifting their true position on Russia in any meaningful fashion," he said.

China has tried to play both sides of Russia's war in Ukraine — a strategy that looks increasingly untenable.

In the run-up to the invasion, Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin palled around on the sidelines of the Beijing Olympics, publishing a joint statement steeped in shared grievances with and anger at the United States.

As it became clearer that Putin's "limited military operation" was a full-scale war playing out in public view, Beijing tried in some ways to distance itself from Moscow. Chinese officials have expressed dismay over the human cost of the war and touted humanitarian aid to Ukraine. In a video call this month, Xi told President Biden that the war in Ukraine is "not something we want to see."

But Beijing has not signaled willingness to fundamentally change its position or use its "no limits" strategic partnership with Moscow to pressure Putin into ending the fighting. In the call with Biden, Xi implied the United States caused the conflict by failing to address Russia's security concerns, telling the president, "He who tied the bell to the tiger must take it off."

At the summit with the E.U., Chinese leaders will maintain a similar line and raise concerns about NATO expansion in Europe, according to one Chinese official familiar with plans for the meeting.

"The Chinese side is resolute and clear and will resist pressure to take sides in the Ukraine conflict," said the official, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

Some E.U. leaders, unlike U.S. officials, appear to hold out hope that China could help pursue peace. This month, Josep Borrell, the E.U.'s top diplomat, suggested Beijing is uniquely placed to mediate between Russia and Ukraine — an idea dismissed by U.S. intelligence and other officials.

In a video call with Borrell on Tuesday, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said China was “deeply grieved” over the fighting in Ukraine and would work with the international community to call for a cease-fire.

On Wednesday, hosting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for the first time since the start of the invasion, Wang said relations between China and Russia had withstood “the test of changes in the international situation” and that Beijing is eager to take China-Russia relations to “an even higher level.”

China’s parroting of Russian disinformation about U.S.-backed labs for the study of diseases in Ukraine has been particularly harmful to Beijing’s reputation, said some U.S. officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the matter’s sensitivity.

“Beijing hopes to come out of this with Europe seeing China as a wholly neutral party to the war in Ukraine, and with the old, comfortable status quo restored: with Europe divided and deeply hesitant to compromise trade and investment with China in the name of geopolitical security,” said Kevin Rudd, a former Australian prime minister and now president of the Asia Society. “This is an unlikely outcome at this point.”

Indeed, China’s stance seems to be quickening the shift to a tougher European approach to Beijing.

Just over a year ago, the E.U. — led by Germany — was pushing to close an investment agreement with Beijing. The deal was put on hold following moves to sanction China over human rights abuses in Xinjiang and China’s subsequent sanctions on European diplomats and lawmakers.

China’s recent attempt to economically punish Lithuania for drawing closer to Taiwan angered many in Europe, injecting new momentum into calls for an anti-coercion instrument to protect E.U. member states from economic intimidation. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, E.U. countries will be even less likely to ignore China’s bullying of a small country, E.U. diplomats and analysts said.

Janka Oertel, director of the Asia program at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said there is a sense in Europe that “it is Russia today, but it could be China tomorrow, so we have to guard ourselves for this new reality that is emerging.”

The shift in mood is perhaps most striking in Germany, where the end of the Angela Merkel era and beginning of war in Ukraine have led to a security and diplomatic overhaul. Whereas Merkel put trade at the center of her China policy, the new coalition government has proposed a more values-based approach.

Helena Legarda, lead analyst at the Mercator Institute for China Studies, said Chinese officials have signaled over the past few months a desire to bring E.U.-China relations back on track, but those efforts have been undercut by Beijing’s position on an issue of such existential weight to European countries.

“The ultimate goal of China is for the E.U. and the U.S. to go separate ways. What Russia has done and China, by not taking a stance, is achieving the opposite,” she said. “It’s brought the E.U. and the U.S. closer together and brought new life to NATO as the backbone of European peace and security.”

There is still some hope in Europe that China may step up, or at least that it can be persuaded not to make things worse by offering Russia arms or other support.

“The fact that China hasn’t provided active or material support is what’s keeping the relationship from really going off the rails,” Legarda said.

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HEADLINE	03/31 CJTC: new police law to past misconduct
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/politics/2022/03/new-wa-police-accountability-law-can-now-include-past-misconduct

GIST

The body that licenses police officers in Washington state has decided to apply a new police accountability law to past misconduct, instead of only to officer misconduct that occurred after the law took effect last July.

The vote by the state Criminal Justice Training Commission resolves a dispute between lawmakers and the commission about how far back officers can be held accountable under [Senate Bill 5051](#).

The law, which took effect July 25, 2021, expands the criminal justice commission's authority to investigate and decertify police officers. Decertification — essentially, revoking an officer's policing license — prevents someone from working as a cop anywhere in the state.

As detailed in a [story by Crosscut last August](#), staff members of the state commission believed the commission could not apply the new decertification law retroactively to older misconduct. That was counter to [key lawmakers' intentions](#) when passing the bill.

The issue gained new attention last fall, when Pierce County Sheriff Ed Troyer was criminally charged with making a false statement after he [called 911 on a Black newspaper carrier](#).

Because that incident occurred in January 2021, six months before the new decertification law took effect, the Criminal Justice Training Commission said it couldn't even consider going after Troyer's policing license.

Now, the agency is changing course.

On Wednesday, the commission's governing board voted to apply the new law "to conduct occurring both before and after July 25, 2021, and specifically to the conduct the officer knew or should have known violated law or policy and impacts suitability to serve."

"Accountability doesn't have a deadline," said one of the commission members, Tim Reynon, shortly before the 14-4 vote. The commission recently was expanded from 16 to 22 members, adding more community members and including fewer representatives from law enforcement.

"For my community that has been subject to misconduct for generations, we want to see the standard applied across the board," added Reynon, a former Puyallup Tribal Council member who now is a tribal liaison for the city of Seattle.

State Sen. Manka Dhingra, a Democrat from Redmond who chairs the Senate Law & Justice Committee, said the commission's decision is the "right direction" and "consistent with the understanding I had when this bill was passed."

"This is really about making sure the public has faith in our law enforcement," Dhingra said.

Not all members of the Criminal Justice Training Commission thought delving into past misconduct was a good idea.

King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg was one of four commission members who voted against decertifying officers for older misconduct. He said he's partly concerned that the staff of the Criminal Justice Training Commission will be overwhelmed with requests to investigate and decertify officers for older offenses, which he said could diminish the agency's effectiveness and put newer misconduct cases on the back burner.

"If we get swamped, we won't be able to meet the expectations that community has," Satterberg said Wednesday.

Satterberg said he also worries that the commission could open itself up to legal challenges if it tries to go after older officer misconduct.

While the state Attorney General's Office recently told the commission that older police misconduct isn't necessarily off-limits, Satterberg said [the same memo](#) from the Attorney General's Office also illustrated how current law is "squishy" on the matter.

Some details — such as how far back in time the commission should look, and what kinds of older misbehavior is worth reviewing — are things the commission has yet to work out.

State Rep. Roger Goodman, D-Kirkland, previously had expressed concern that using the new law to punish officers for older offenses could violate officers' due process rights.

But he said Wednesday that he thinks it would be legal for the commission to review some older conduct — especially things that were already illegal or violations of policy before the new law took effect.

The Washington Coalition for Police Accountability, which includes many family members of people killed by police, has pushed for the Criminal Justice Training Commission to look at officers' past misconduct, including Troyer's.

So have [many other groups](#), including the Washington Black Lives Matter Alliance.

The charges against Troyer stem from a Jan. 27 incident in which he called 911 on a Black newspaper carrier, Sedrick Altheimer, and repeatedly claimed Altheimer had threatened to kill him. Troyer later told Tacoma police that no such threats were made, according to a police report.

In October, the state Attorney General's Office charged Troyer with one count of false reporting and one count of making a false or misleading statement to a public servant, both of which are misdemeanors.

Troyer's attorney, John Sheeran, said Wednesday that he is confident Troyer will be found not guilty of the criminal charge. He said the Criminal Justice Training Commission would be wrong to pursue Troyer's decertification while the criminal case is underway.

"We are confident that the jurors of Pierce County will vindicate Sheriff Troyer, and any action by any other entity before that would be premature and inappropriate," Sheeran said.

Even if the commission eventually decides to decertify Troyer, doing so [wouldn't remove him from office](#). That's because, unlike most police officers, Troyer is an independently elected official who can be removed only by a recall campaign, by being convicted of a felony, or by being voted out at his next election.

Because of that, several public officials and community groups have called on Troyer to resign.

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HEADLINE	04/01 Massive homeless camp in Phoenix
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7w5ma/phoenix-tent-city-homeless-encampment
GIST	<p>PHOENIX — After 68-year-old Steve Harrison's landlord jacked up his rent from \$970 to \$1,300, he had no choice but to start sleeping in his little 2001 Toyota Echo, parked in one of the nation's largest homeless encampments, near downtown Phoenix.</p> <p>Harrison, a grandfather to 10 kids and a former school custodian, never saw himself landing here. But he only makes \$1,450 a month between retirement and Social Security benefits. He couldn't live on \$150 after accounting for rent. So he was evicted from his studio apartment in February after refusing to pay—and joined what has quickly become a humanitarian crisis in Arizona's otherwise bustling capital city.</p> <p>"It's crazy," Harrison said while sitting in the Justa Center, which provides support to homeless seniors living in the area. "They need to regulate the rent in this town."</p>

Harrison had no idea how big the encampment had become until he was in it himself. Now, he sometimes sees his former neighbors out on the streets.

Over the last several months, the encampment, which spans several blocks, has swelled to some 1,000 people sleeping in or beside lines of tents, shopping carts, tarps, bikes, and dumpsters. The tent cities that make waves on the West Coast typically top out at a few hundred people. Phoenix's is well past that—only Los Angeles' Skid Row really rivals its size.

Many of the residents in the camp are elderly and use wheelchairs, canes, or walkers. Several people there said they'd become homeless during the pandemic, either because their rent prices soared or because they lost the ability to pay rent when they couldn't get work. The surging rents are especially untenable for people like Harrison, who lives on a fixed income, like many others in the camp.

Though many residents of the camp spoke about fears of drug use, fires, and violence there—a 19-year-old fatally stabbed another person nearby last week, reportedly over a dispute about money and shoes—they also acknowledged there was nowhere else to go.

"It's depressing, and it's tragic, and it's horrifying," said Amy Schwabenlender, the director of the Human Services Campus, a 13-acre hub with a slate of resources for homeless people just outside of the encampment. She can see the crammed-together tents from her office window. "The lack of urgency that decision-makers and people with money seem to have about addressing it is incredibly sad and frustrating."

Hundreds more people sleep inside a large Central Arizona Shelter Services facility on the campus, as well as in an additional COVID relief shelter. The shelter can house 520 adults, but it's typically full. When beds do become available indoors, though, some homeless people said they still opt to stay outside due to conditions in the shelter. Altogether, nearly 2,000 homeless people live in the immediate area, either in the encampment or on the Human Services Campus, according to Schwabenlender.

Even in a topsy-turvy pandemic housing market where renters wage bidding wars and homebuyers compete with out-of-state investors, Phoenix's growth manages to stand out. The typical home value in the Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale area grew by about \$103,500 between December 2020 and December 2021. That's about twice the region's median annual income, according to Zillow. Rent prices in Phoenix have also surged about \$377 on average, or about 25 percent, since last February, compared to a national increase of \$274, data from Zillow shows.

Unsurprisingly, some households just can't handle that kind of increase: About a quarter of Americans lack any emergency savings, and inflation, which is at its highest point in decades nationwide, is hitting Phoenix particularly hard. And some families are still reeling from the widespread job loss triggered by COVID-19, plus the end of the special government benefits and stimulus checks meant to cushion the blow.

"With the pandemic, it destroyed everybody," Mike Andrews, a gregarious 64-year-old in a button-down shirt, said from inside his tent as he shared drinks and snacks with friends. "There's a thin line between you and normal life, between you and that guy standing in front of a Circle K asking you for 25 cents."

Andrews, who said he lost his political fundraising job due to the pandemic, is on a waiting list for housing. One of Andrews' friends at the camp, a 59-year-old man who declined to give his full name, also became homeless for the first time during the pandemic. He sleeps inside the shelter.

"I've met every walk of life here," Andrews said.

'Everything is going up'

At around 4 a.m. Wednesday, volunteers and employees at the Human Services Campus fanned out across the dark encampment, where many residents were still sleeping, to try to get a better grip on how people

got here and how they could get help. Even at that early hour, a couple of people were already leaving to get to their jobs.

Some of the participants were part of an effort to count unhoused people across Maricopa County just a few months back. At the time, the data showed the unsheltered homeless population had increased by 35 percent since the start of the pandemic, with about 5,000 people sleeping outside in the entire county.

Since then, the situation at the encampment near downtown has somehow gotten even worse. A week before the county-wide count took place in January, 728 people were sleeping outside the Human Services Campus, according to Schwabenlender. By March 1, it was 948 people.

“A lot of clients have jobs and just can’t get an apartment,” said Alexa Parra, an outreach navigator at Community Bridges, an organization that provides a host of services for homeless people on the Human Services Campus. “Everything is going up.”

As Parra and others walked through a section of the encampment, gently approaching tents and offering free cigarettes, they asked people a bevy of questions: their name, age, ethnicity, race, gender, veteran status, whether they had an ID to get on campus and access services, and what kind of help they might need, among others. Some of the people conducting the survey put on face masks, not due to COVID-19 but because of the smell of urine emanating from the streets.

A 35-year-old resident of the nearby homeless shelter, Marie-Claire—“like the magazine”—said that she, too, became homeless last year. Her landlord didn’t renew her lease in Mesa after she complained that a neighbor had been sexually harassing her.

While she receives disability payments, landlords typically want a gross income three times the actual rent price. That made it almost impossible for her to sign a lease, despite the fact that she has money to foot the bill.

“When I do find an apartment, they are booked, booked, booked,” Marie-Claire said. “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe how many apartments I’ve seen. I’m on five waiting lists.”

Zach West, a 32-year-old homeless man living in a tent in the encampment, said he lost his restaurant job when the pandemic hit, though he received unemployment for a while. But then his landlord raised the rent on his one-bedroom apartment from \$750 to \$1,250 after minor renovations, and he was evicted.

Eventually, he wound up at the encampment with his boyfriend. West said he’s been on a housing waiting list for years, though he’s hoping he’ll be able to get a place through a federal program that assists low-income people living with HIV/AIDS.

“There’s new people every day,” West said. “When I first moved to Phoenix, I had a beautiful three-bedroom house in the most desirable neighborhood in the city for \$850 a month. That house now rents for \$1,500—almost doubled in rent.”

In some ways, Phoenix has become a victim of its own success. Coming out of the recession, the city started to experience a massive population boom, which coincided with institutional investors swooping in to purchase a bunch of cheap homes to rent, according to Mark Stapp, a professor of real estate at Arizona State University’s W.P. Carey School of Business. Phoenix at one point had grossly overbuilt, leaving an excess supply of real estate. Then the city’s economy expanded at a breakneck pace; it eventually started to run out of lots to build homes on.

Work-from-anywhere policies during the pandemic also meant that people with droll office jobs in overpriced cities could look to sunny Phoenix for a change of pace. Between 2020 and 2021, Maricopa County gained more residents from domestic migration than anywhere else in the U.S., according to census data.

“There’s winners and losers in this economic expansion,” Stapp said. “You talk to the economic development people, you talk to the elected officials, they’re excited because we’ve got substantial amounts of really good job growth. We’re a very attractive market in that regard.”

Yet the low-income workers who might’ve been able to afford a modest apartment before the pandemic now have to contend with higher rent prices without the kind of wages they’d need to match them. And the people who were barely holding on pre-pandemic are getting pushed out entirely.

“We have an increasing number of working poor, and they’re very vulnerable,” Stapp said. “It takes one thing—flat tire, transmission, you catch COVID, you’re out of work, something happens—and before you know it, you’re so vulnerable, you’re homeless. We saw that happening in places like San Francisco. It’s happening here.”

Yes, some people at the encampment choose to be there, homeless service workers acknowledged. Drug use is rampant. Mental illness is profound. But sometimes it’s the actual act of living outside that breaks people down.

There are efforts to get people back indoors, or at least into more tenable conditions. A sprung structure—the kind of quickly-constructed building that’s used in the military or for an emergency field hospital—will offer 100 new beds on campus, as well as additional restrooms. Lisa Glow, the chief executive officer of Central Arizona Shelter Services, said her facility plans to add 80 beds by June.

On the state level, a bill would put \$50 million toward structured campsites, tiny homes, and street outreach. But that legislation is backed by the Cicero Institute, a think tank out of Texas that’s pushed controversial proposals that essentially criminalize homelessness in other states. Some advocates have also been critical of the bill’s intentions, particularly since it doesn’t feature permanent housing solutions.

The cost of doing nothing, however, is even higher. A banner near Glow’s office features the names of the hundreds of homeless people who died in Maricopa County last year—Jose A., Horace F., Lynne H.

Soon, the daily temperature in Phoenix will reach highs of 90 or 100 degrees. Then what?

“With the rise in homelessness, and first-time homelessness, we’re not going in the right direction,” Glow said.

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HEADLINE	04/01 April Fools' Day
SOURCE	https://www.npr.org/2022/04/01/1089947257/april-fools-day-history
GIST	<p>Ever wonder where April Fools' Day came from? Well, surprise! The joke's on you. Nobody seems to know its true origins.</p> <p>Historians do have some clues, though.</p> <p>For one thing, we <i>do</i> know that April Fools' Day customs date back to at least Renaissance Europe, but it's likely the tradition originated long before then.</p> <p>Some historians have linked April Fools' Day to the ancient Roman festival of "Hilaria," where at the end of March, people would come together to commemorate the resurrection of the god Attis. It was a celebration of renewal in which revelers would dress up in disguises and imitate others.</p> <p>It's also possible that the medieval celebration of the Feast of Fools, where a mock bishop or pope was elected and church customs were parodied, could have inspired the day.</p> <p>Some gullible "fish" might also explain the tradition</p>

Other historians believe April Fools' Day has its origins in the 16th century, when France switched from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar.

The Julian calendar began in March with the spring equinox and was celebrated until April 1. By switching to the Gregorian calendar, the new year would now begin on Jan. 1.

News traveled slowly back then, and not everyone knew about or was willing to change when to celebrate the new year. Those who continued to celebrate in the spring were often ridiculed and made the butt of jokes.

Some pranks included having a paper fish placed on a person's back as they were called "*poisson d'avril*," or "April fish."

One of the first known references to this term, "*poisson d'avril*," is found in a 1508 poem written by Eloy d'Amerval. The phrase itself doesn't necessarily mean there was a holiday on April 1, but the idea of the "April fish" is that fish were more plentiful in the spring and thus easier to catch. In other words, an "April fish" was more gullible than fish caught in other seasons.

In 1561, an early, clear-cut reference to April Fools' Day appears in a Flemish poem written by Eduard de Dene. In the poem, a nobleman sends his servant out on a series of wild errands. The servant eventually realizes that these are "fool's errands" because the date is April 1.

Scholars say one of the first mentions of an April Fools' Day in English appears in John Aubrey's 1686 book *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, which reads, in part: "We observe it on the first of April. And so, it is kept in Germany everywhere."

Even in 1760 there was speculation as to the origins of the holiday, with a line in *Poor Robin's Almanac* reading:

"The First of April some do say. Is set apart for all Fool's Day. But why the people call it so. Nor I nor they themselves do know"

The media has been in on the joke for years

The tradition has evolved over the years with modern forms of media [upping the ante on pranks and tricks](#). Newspapers, radio, TV stations and websites have all participated in the tradition, making April 1 a day where everyone truly needs to be on their guard.

On April 1, 1905, for example, a German newspaper wrote that thieves had dug a tunnel underneath the U.S. Treasury and stolen \$268 million in silver and gold.

One of the more famous pranks occurred in 1957, when [the BBC aired a segment](#) showing Swiss harvesters picking spaghetti off trees and bushes, claiming the region had had "an exceptionally heavy spaghetti crop" that year.

NPR has gotten in on the fun too. In 1992, the show *Talk of the Nation* ran a hoax story in which Richard Nixon — played by Rich Little — announced he was running for president again with the slogan "I didn't do anything wrong, and I won't do it again."

On April 1, 2014, NPR published an article titled ["Why Doesn't America Read Anymore?"](#) The post sparked heated debate on social media — particularly among those who neglected to actually click on the link. Those who did were greeted with a challenge:

"Congratulations, genuine readers, and happy April Fools' Day! We sometimes get the sense that some people are commenting on NPR stories that they haven't actually read. If you are reading this, please like this post and do not comment on it. Then let's see what people have to say about this 'story.'"

	<p>Although we may never know its true origins, April 1 has come to represent a day of joy and comedy as we move out of the darkness of winter and into the spring.</p> <p>And no matter how you choose to celebrate the day, it's best to be wary of what you read and what you hear on April Fools' Day.</p> <p>Except for this story, of course.</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Increased smoke pollution on the horizon
SOURCE	https://arstechnica.com/science/2022/04/increased-smoke-pollution-on-the-horizon-for-pacific-northwest/
GIST	<p>In the western United States, summer 2018 was a bad time for wildfires. In all, according to the government of California, 7,948 separate fires saw 1,975,086 acres burnt to a crisp, 24,226 structures destroyed or damaged, and 100 confirmed deaths. In the following summers, things didn't improve.</p> <p>New research from a team assembled by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and various universities suggests that, if climate mitigation efforts don't go far enough, summer wildfires will only get worse. In a worst-case scenario, the research said that the problems caused by fires in the Pacific Northwest could result in a tripling of air pollution.</p> <p>"This is the pathway we want to avoid at any cost," Meiyun Lin, one of the authors of the paper and a NOAA researcher, told Ars.</p> <p>It's getting hot in here</p> <p>The team of researchers developed a statistical model that looks into interactions between the climate, the ecosystems in the region, and various socioeconomic factors including mitigation efforts. The researchers then applied this model to future fire scenarios projected by various Earth System Models.</p> <p>From this, the researchers were able to look into potential future fine particulate pollution from wildfires under different mitigation scenarios. In particular, the team looked at pm2.5, or particles under 2.5 microns. "Think about a single hair falling on your hand," Lin said, adding that, when inhaled, the hair can cause a slew of health issues—from exacerbating asthma to increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease.</p> <p>The team identified three different scenarios of varying severity. In the strongest mitigation scenario, humanity reaches net-zero by 2050. Even if humans amp up their use of renewables, carbon capture, and storage tech, the pollution from wildfires will still see an uptick—though that uptick would be less severe. Lin said the pollution will only increase by between 40 and 60 percent. "This highlights the co-benefits of climate mitigation on air quality," she said.</p> <p>The team also identified an intermediate mitigation scenario. This scenario involves emissions remaining at their current levels into 2050 and reaching net-zero at the end of the century. In this case, the wildfire particulates in the region could potentially double.</p> <p>In the lowest mitigation scenario, the world doubles carbon emissions by 2050—and those emissions would continue to increase throughout the century. If this happens, the region could see smoke pollution from wildfires triple by the end of the century.</p> <p>Further, under this scenario, the region is likely to see extreme smoke pollution events recur every three to five years, starting later this century. The best way to avoid these fates is to keep reducing emissions. "The science is clear," Lin said. "Global warming is caused by human activity."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Seattle approves SPD \$2.3M DHS funding
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SOURCE	https://www.capitolhillseattle.com/2022/03/seattle-police-approved-for-2-3m-in-homeland-security-training-and-equipment-including-new-vehicle-barriers-body-armor-and-tactical-robots/
GIST	<p>The Seattle City Council this week approved Seattle Police's use of \$2.325 million in funding from the United States Department of Homeland Security to purchase equipment including advanced body armor, vehicle barricades, "tactical robots," and new surveillance and night vision technology, plus tactical training for Seattle and area law enforcement.</p> <p>The approval follows a previous authorization for the Seattle Fire Department to accept \$750,000 in Homeland Security funding as the Seattle City Council last year delayed approving SPD's use of the funds "until the members of the Council's Public Safety and Human Services Committee could conduct a more detailed analysis of SPD's plan to spend the UASI funds," according to the council's brief on the decision.</p> <p>The spending will cover "program management and sustainment; citizen preparedness and outreach; contract analysts; equipment and training to respond to acts of terrorism; and mass care shelter planning with the Human Services Department," according to the council's brief on the approved proposal.</p> <p>"All new technologies that meet the criteria for surveillance are subject to review by City Council under the Seattle Surveillance Ordinance (SMC 14.18)," SPD's report on the line items reads. "All new technologies must also undergo a privacy assessment to ensure that the City is following it's privacy principles and privacy policy, to incorporate the appropriate privacy practices into daily operations and build public trust."</p> <p>The approval comes as Seattle officials are still coming to terms with the aftermath of the 2020 Black Lives Matter and anti-police protests and SPD's flawed response to the demonstrations. Many findings have shown that SPD's actions and use of tactical and crowd control gear added to and often sparked dangerous and damageful unrest.</p> <p>Included in the \$2.3 million in line items signed off on by the council this week are SPD plans to purchase equipment including \$175,000 "advanced ballistic protection" armor "for active shooter response," \$300,000 in "readily deployable vehicle barricades" to be used to protect "soft target" locations "easily accessible to the general public and relatively unprotected, making it vulnerable to attack," and \$160,000 for a "Binocular Night Vision System Enhanced Clip-On Thermal Imager."</p> <p>"When dealing with radicalized domestic terrorists, special teams need information quickly to identify threats and locate victims to minimize loss of life," the defense of the SPD line item reads.</p> <p>The spending will also include tech for Seattle's neighbors. Plans for two "Regional Tactical Robots" will deploy one new unit in Seattle and another in Tacoma. The robots are equipped with "manipulator arms and firing circuits" and "can assist with opening doors, searching, placing charges, and providing situational awareness through audio and video feeds, mitigating risks to both department personnel and community members." The "Firing circuits" are used "to remotely detonate charges placed to gain entry into an area by a robot."</p> <p>The funding also will power SPD beyond new gear and gadgets including \$240,000 for planning with Homeland Security across the region, \$147,000 to pay for a regional manager, and \$500,000 to pay for analysts at the "WA State Fusion Center" program "to detect, deter, and prevent terrorist attacks."</p> <p>"This is accomplished through open information sharing with appropriate stakeholders," the SPD line item notes.</p> <p>Seattle Police has a spotty record for successfully deploying the tech it purchases with Homeland Security grants. In 2013, SPD was forced to ground two drones purchased with the funds over privacy concerns even though officials said the drones would be tightly controlled, regulated, and would not be used to conduct random surveillance. A \$5 million federal Homeland Security grant also powered controversial cameras placed along the waterfront — and beyond. Two years later, CHS reported on these federal surveillance cameras installed along 23rd Ave. Federal funding for gunshot detection surveillance in the Central</p>

	District was also pursued under the Ed Murray administration. Current Mayor Bruce Harrell has said he would support the technology's use in the city.
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HEADLINE	03/31 Ex-SPD chief Carmen Best joins Microsoft
SOURCE	https://www.geekwire.com/2022/former-seattle-police-chief-carmen-best-joins-microsoft-as-director-of-global-security-risk-operations/
GIST	<p>Carmen Best has joined Microsoft as director of global security risk operations.</p> <p>Best served as Seattle Police chief from August 2018 to September 2020, and spent more than two decades in various roles with the Seattle Police Department, including as deputy chief and assistant chief with the Investigations Bureau. She departed following police funding cuts and the police reform protests.</p> <p>At Microsoft, Best will be “responsible for global virtual security operations team, intelligence, executive threat intel, special asset security, event security, travel security, security risk operations, security program management office (PMO),” according to her LinkedIn.</p> <p>“I’ve always admired Microsoft’s commitment to supporting and empowering diverse communities,” Best wrote in a LinkedIn post. “With new challenges and opportunities ahead, I’m ready to build on my experiences and join a team whose values of helping others, inclusion of all, and engaging the community align with my own.”</p> <p>Microsoft’s Global Security arm “protects the people and assets of Microsoft.” We’ve reached out to Best to learn more about her new gig and we’ll update this post when we hear back.</p> <p>Best, 57, was a reportedly finalist last year to become police chief with the New York Police Department. She was the first Black woman to lead the SPD.</p> <p>Best was most recently a global account director with Securitas Security Services, where she landed after retiring from SPD.</p> <p>Last year, Best joined the AI ethics board at Axon, a company that develops law enforcement technology such as body cameras. Best is also a contributor at MSNBC and a law enforcement analyst for KING5. And in October she published a book, “Black in Blue: Lessons on Leadership, Breaking Barriers, and Racial Reconciliation.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Interim SPD chief positioned to stay?
SOURCE	https://publicola.com/2022/03/31/despite-national-search-interim-police-chief-adrian-diaz-is-well-positioned-to-stick-around/?shared=email&msg=fail
GIST	<p>Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell announced on Thursday that he plans to launch a national search for a permanent police chief in April, and publicly encouraged the interim chief, Adrian Diaz, to apply for the role. While Diaz is Harrell’s most obvious option to lead SPD permanently, Seattle’s city charter requires the mayor to run a competitive search process for a new police chief.</p> <p>To comply with the charter, Harrell will need to choose the next permanent chief from a field of three finalists, and the city council will need to confirm Harrell’s pick.</p> <p>A city council resolution, adopted in 2019 amid a contentious appointment process for the head of the Human Services Department, requires the mayor to keep the council in the loop during the process of appointing all department heads, including the police chief; it also states the council’s intent to consider stakeholder engagement, racial equity, and whether impacted groups were included in the selection process before confirming a nomination.</p>

Diaz has been open about his desire to lead the department permanently since he replaced his predecessor, Carmen Best, in 2020. Former mayor Jenny Durkan’s decision not to begin the search for a new police chief during her final year in office gave Diaz more time to settle into his role, and the compounding aftershocks of citywide protests in 2020, a mass exodus of officers from the department, debates about SPD’s budget, and an uptick in violent crime gave Diaz visibility as soon as he took the job.

A month into his tenure, Diaz moved 100 officers from specialized units to a [citywide response team](#) intended to supplement patrol units in any precinct as needed; that team, called the Community Response Group, initially took charge of protest management for SPD. In March of 2021, he overturned the findings of a high-profile Office of Police Accountability investigation into SPD’s use of tear gas on Capitol Hill in 2020, shifting responsibility from the lieutenant who ordered the use of tear gas to an assistant chief. The decision [spurred some criticism](#) from accountability advocates and a lawsuit from the assistant chief, Steve Hirjak, whom Diaz demoted to captain.

During the Seattle City Council’s debate over how to adjust SPD’s budget to reflect its depleted ranks after more than a year of record-high attrition, Diaz was a vocal critic of a plan to cut funding for vacant positions from the department’s budget, at one point [erroneously claiming](#) that former council president Lorena González proposed eliminating 100 officers’ jobs. And as Harrell’s administration forged ahead with a plan to crack down on crime “hot spots” in [Little Saigon](#) and downtown Seattle, Diaz appeared beside the mayor at press conferences, commenting that the city “can’t arrest its way” out of the public safety and public health problems on display at the targeted “hot spots.”

For Harrell, hiring Diaz as the permanent chief would be consistent with his view—expressed in campaign speeches and at press events—that SPD, under Diaz, accepts that reform is necessary and is a cooperative partner in his plan to “revitalize” the downtown core. In a press release on Thursday, Harrell urged Diaz to apply to be permanent chief, commenting that he has “been pleased with Interim Chief Diaz’s approach and commitment to progress on public safety.”

SPD’s [ongoing staffing shortage](#) may also color the search for a new police chief. As the department tries to retain older, more experienced officers, Diaz’s relative popularity among the SPD rank-and-file could be an asset, while a shake-up in department leadership could be a liability. Though Diaz has fired more officers than Best did during her time as chief, including a dozen from the Seattle Police Officers’ Guild, he has mostly avoided rocking the boat on disciplinary issues; [an audit by Seattle’s Office of the Inspector General for Public Safety last year](#) found that when presented with a range of possible ways to discipline an officer for misconduct, Diaz most often chooses less severe options. His stalwart advocacy for hiring more officers has also been a boon for officer morale, as is the continuity he represents—Diaz has worked only for SPD, and he has led the department through a difficult transition period.

At the same time, Diaz has been relatively supportive, at least in principle, of scaling up Seattle’s civilian emergency response options, including SPD’s Community Service Officers and the Seattle Fire Department’s Health One program.

But some accountability problems that have persisted since Diaz took charge of SPD could mar his record, including ongoing problems with officers treating members of the public disrespectfully or unprofessionally: among the most common [complaints](#) to the Office of Police Accountability in the past year. Accountability advocates also question SPD’s role in the city’s renewed push to clear encampments, particularly downtown and in the International District.

Meanwhile, the King County Department of Public Defense has criticized “Operation New Day,” an SPD initiative that has resulted in a wave of arrests for misdemeanor offenses like shoplifting. Diaz’s close relationship with Best—one of his primary mentors—may also raise eyebrows among some accountability advocates critical of Best for her protest response decisions in 2020.

Harrell’s office said Thursday that they plan to use an “independent third-party firm” to identify candidates for the position, and the office is also assembling a search committee to help narrow the list of

	<p>candidates. The search committee will include members of the Community Police Commission and business representatives, among others.</p> <p>Given that widespread condemnation and scrutiny of police leadership occurred in practically every major city in the country over the past two years, and given that SPD remains under federal oversight, interested and viable candidates from elsewhere may be hard to come by. And Diaz's hometown advantage might dissuade outside candidates from applying.</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 IAEA probes Chernobyl radiation sickness
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/russians-fled-chernobyl-with-radiation-sickness-says-ukraine-as-iaea-investigates
GIST	<p>The UN atomic watchdog is investigating Ukrainian claims that Russian soldiers occupying Chernobyl nuclear power station left after receiving high doses of radiation.</p> <p>The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said it could not confirm the claims by Ukrainian state power company Energoatom and was seeking an independent assessment.</p> <p>Energoatom said the Russians dug trenches in the forest inside the exclusion zone at the site of the world's worst nuclear disaster, and that the troops "panicked at the first sign of illness" which "showed up very quickly" and began preparing to leave.</p> <p>The Ukrainian deputy prime minister, Iryna Vereshchuk, also made the claim that Russian troops who dug trenches in the forest were exposed to radiation, but it has not been independently verified.</p> <p>Some reports have suggested the soldiers are being sent to a special medical facility in Belarus after driving tanks through the "dead zone" around the nuclear plant, kicking up radioactive dust.</p> <p>Russian forces also retreated from the nearby town of Slavutych, where workers at Chernobyl live, Energoatom said.</p> <p>The IAEA said it was preparing to send its first "assistance and support mission" to Chernobyl in northern Ukraine in the next few days.</p> <p>Though Russian soldiers seized control of Chernobyl soon after the 24 February invasion, the plant's Ukrainian staff continued to oversee the safe storage of spent nuclear fuel and supervise the concrete-encased remains of the reactor that exploded in 1986, causing the world's worst nuclear accident.</p> <p>In a separate post, Energoatom said the Russian side had formally agreed to hand back to Ukraine the responsibility for protecting Chernobyl. It shared the scan of a document signed by people it identified as a senior staff member at Chernobyl and the Russian military official assigned to guarding Chernobyl. Reuters could not immediately verify the authenticity of the document.</p> <p>Ukraine has repeatedly expressed safety concerns about Chernobyl and demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops, whose presence prevented the rotation of personnel for a time.</p> <p>Asked to comment on the accounts from Chernobyl staff, Russia's defence ministry did not respond.</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Mariupol: Russia forces blocking aid
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/ukraine-russia-peace-talks-continue-amid-fresh-bid-to-help-mariupol-residents-flee
GIST	An aide to the mayor of Mariupol has said the besieged southern Ukrainian city remains closed for anyone trying to enter and is "very dangerous" for anyone trying to leave.

Petro Andryushchenko said Russian forces had since Thursday been preventing even the smallest amount of humanitarian supplies reaching trapped residents, making clear a planned “humanitarian corridor” had not been opened.

“The city remains closed to entry and very dangerous to exit with personal transport,” he said on the Telegram messaging app on Friday. “In addition, since yesterday the occupiers have categorically not allowed any humanitarian aid – even in small quantities – into the city.”

A convoy of buses that set out for Mariupol did not reach the city, Ukrainian officials said on Thursday evening. Russia had promised a limited ceasefire along the route from Mariupol to the Ukraine-held city of Zaporizhzhia.

Repeated efforts to set up humanitarian corridors for the evacuation of up to 170,000 people who remain in Mariupol, which has suffered four weeks of bombardment and dwindling supplies, have failed. Ukraine has accused Russian forces of shelling supposedly safe routes outside of several fighting hotspots, claims that Moscow denies.

In other developments, peace talks were due to resume by video on Friday, the Ukrainian negotiator David Arakhamia said, focusing on the peace framework Kyiv presented during a face-to-face meeting in Istanbul this week that Moscow described as constructive.

Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, further upped the diplomatic stakes, signing a decree requiring foreign buyers to pay in roubles for Russian gas from Friday or have their energy contracts halted – a demand Germany, France and the UK instantly rejected and that Berlin described as blackmail.

The move follows “a personal request from the French president and German chancellor to Russian president Vladimir Putin”, said Russia’s defence ministry.

On Thursday night, Volodymyr Zelenskiy repeated his warning that Russia was preparing for “powerful strikes” in the Donbas region after appearing to withdraw from an assault on Kyiv. The Ukrainian president dismissed the withdrawal of Russian forces near Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy as tactical. The Pentagon also said Russia might be repositioning some of its forces to send them to the Donbas.

The UK’s Ministry of Defence said Russia was pulling forces out of Georgia to reinforce its invasion of Ukraine in a move it said was unplanned and “indicative of the unexpected losses it has sustained during the invasion”.

Both the US and UK have suggested Putin is becoming increasingly frustrated, with the US president, Joe Biden, saying Putin “seems to be self-isolated” and noting that “there’s some indication that he has fired or put under house arrest some of his advisers”, without citing evidence.

The White House director of communications, Kate Bedingfield, said the war had been a “strategic disaster” for Russia and it was “working to redefine the initial aims” of the invasion.

The UK defence secretary, Ben Wallace, said Putin was “not the force he used to be” and was “now a man in a cage he built himself”.

Despite the ongoing talks, there is mounting western scepticism about Russia’s intentions in the talks, more than five weeks into its invasion of Ukraine. There has been no real sign of the partial military pullback in northern Ukraine it had promised as a goodwill gesture, suggesting the Kremlin may be playing for time.

Kyiv’s chief negotiator, Mykhailo Podolyak, insisted, however, that the Kremlin was considering Ukraine’s proposals, which included an international treaty under which Ukraine would remain neutral, with its security guaranteed by third countries.

HEADLINE	03/31 France military spy chief quits
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/french-military-spy-chief-eric-vidaud-quits-ukraine-failings
GIST	<p>France's military intelligence chief is leaving his post after Paris failed to accurately predict – in contrast with western allies – that Russia would launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several sources with knowledge of his exit have said.</p> <p>Gen Eric Vidaud, who has led the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DRM) since only last summer, is to immediately step down from his post, a military source, who asked not to be named, told AFP.</p> <p>The source confirmed a report on L'Opinion website citing an internal defence ministry investigation that criticised “insufficient briefings” and “failure to master the issues”.</p> <p>Another source told AFP that there had been rumours within the army concerning the departure of the general in recent days, with the possibility that another post could have been offered to him, though in the end this was not the case.</p> <p>In the months before Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, France's assessments had contrasted with the gloomy predictions by allies including the US and Britain who said a serious military assault was imminent.</p> <p>Senior figures from Emmanuel Macron's government insisted there was no suggestion of a full-scale invasion and the French president kept diplomacy going to the last minute, meeting Putin in person in the Kremlin and trying to set up a summit with the US president, Joe Biden.</p> <p>The issue is particularly sensitive as Macron has largely avoided campaigning for the presidential election in April to focus on dealing with the war, aiming to burnish his image as a global statesman.</p> <p>In early March France's top general, Thierry Burkhard, admitted in an interview with Le Monde newspaper that there had been differences in the analyses between France and the US over what would happen in Ukraine.</p> <p>“The Americans said the Russians were going to attack and they were right,” said Burkhard, who has won admirers during the conflict for his frank assessments of the situation.</p> <p>“Our services rather thought that the invasion of Ukraine would have a monstrous cost [for Russia] and that the Russians had other options” to achieve their goals, he said.</p> <p>In fact, the US had high-quality intelligence on Russian preparations and took the unprecedented decision, several weeks before the invasion, to make the information public in an attempt to put pressure on Putin.</p> <p>Alexandre Papaemmanuel, professor at the Institute of Political Studies (IEP) in Paris and a specialist in intelligence, said Washington had employed a new tactic in using intelligence to try to pressurise a foreign leader.</p> <p>He said France was well aware that its own intelligence had failed on this occasion, though he added that the DRM should not be the only branch of the security services to take the blame.</p> <p>Le Monde said the DRM had often found itself sidelined by France's powerful foreign intelligence service, the General Directorate for External Security (DGSE).</p> <p>But Papaemmanuel said: “The warning is for the entire [intelligence] community. You have to be efficient and meet all the threats.”</p>

	<p>A military source said the DRM's main role was provide intelligence on operations, and not on intentions. Its services had concluded that Russia "had the means to invade Ukraine and what happened showed that it was right," the source said.</p> <p>Le Monde said the war in Ukraine had exposed the differences between the intelligence services of France and those of the UK and the US, which have larger budgets and more room for manoeuvre in terms of surveillance law.</p> <p>"Even if this reliance on Anglo-Saxon intelligence has existed for a long time, particularly in the fight against terrorism and in space, the war in Ukraine has shed light on it in a crude way," the paper wrote.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Russia propaganda spreads thru China
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/close-ties-allow-russia-propaganda-to-spread-through-china
GIST	<p>Close ties between Russian and Chinese state media along with strict government control of information have allowed Russian propaganda to spread swiftly throughout China, "nazifying" Ukraine in the eyes of some Chinese citizens and fostering pro-Russian sentiment, a new report has claimed.</p> <p>Taiwan-based cyber monitoring group, Doublethink Labs, tracked state and social media from mid-February until late March. It said Chinese sources were amplifying Russian disinformation about Ukraine and linking Ukrainian nazism to the Hong Kong protests to encourage solidarity between Russian and Chinese people against "foreign forces interfering with internal affairs".</p> <p>Russian authorities had pushed a narrative of nazism in Ukraine as a key justification for its invasion of the country, as well as the threat posed by a Nato expansion – narratives that gained traction in China where anti-US sentiment runs high.</p> <p>China has claimed a neutral stance on the war, but has refused to label Russia's act as an "invasion". Just weeks before the invasion, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin signed a "limitless" partnership. Analysts say the war has left China in a difficult position, between supporting its key ally Russia, and avoiding the punitive sanctions being imposed by other nations. Instead, it has cast events as a conflict created and driven by the US and Nato, and presented itself as a potential mediator.</p> <p>The Doublethink Labs report pointed to content sharing agreements between the two countries' state media, decisions by Chinese censors, influential social media accounts and government directives regarding coverage, as all contributed to driving public support for Russia's attack, despite the Chinese government's nominal stance of neutrality.</p> <p>Prior to the invasion, there was little discussion of Russia's claimed need to "denazify Ukraine" until hostilities broke out, the report said. But the speed with which disinformation spread revealed, "the ease with which Sino-Russian state media cooperation can sow disinformation by citing each other as sources and expanding on each other's angles".</p> <p>"The tendency is clear: one side creates and the other expands, distorting information in a way that is beneficial to both countries."</p> <p>Disinformation was found across domestic Chinese media, Chinese-language Russian media, and Chinese language accounts in western social media platforms that targeted the broader Chinese diaspora and people in Taiwan.</p> <p>In late February, as Russian troops were sent into Donetsk and Luhansk, Chinese media was issued a directive to only use official news released from People's Daily, Xinhua news agency, and China Central Television – state-run mouthpieces which have had content-sharing agreements with Russian state media since as far back as 2015.</p>

Two days later, Russia invaded Ukraine, and China's media pushed out false stories including Russian claims of Ukrainian soldiers surrendering, and their president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, fleeing. Other articles promoted fake polls claiming low support among Ukrainians for joining Nato, according to research by [the Brookings Institute](#).

Three days into the war, Weibo accounts and state-linked blogs resurfaced debunked reports from 2019 that had used a photo of a Ukrainian veteran at Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests as proof the US was funding members of the far-right Azov Battalion to attend the rallies and sow discord. In Taiwan, pro-Beijing social media also latched on to fake Russian news reports in early March of Ukrainian neo-Nazis shooting Chinese citizens and torturing Russian soldiers.

The spread was also influenced by the decisions of censors that blocked Ukraine related content, including posts by a Chinese citizen describing the invasion from inside Odesa, and [senior voices urging China to cut ties with Russia](#). But blocks on the term "Nazi" appeared to have been lifted during the crisis, allowing stories that justified Putin's actions to appear and be shared on Chinese platforms.

Charlie Smith, cofounder of Greatfire.org, a censorship monitoring site, said "Nazi" had long been identified as a keyword on most censorship lists for Chinese internet companies. "Usually once a word ends up on that list, it very rarely comes off," he said. "Sometimes what is not being censored can be more telling than what is being censored."

Chinese authorities have denied spreading disinformation, and foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said the accusation was itself an act of disinformation.

But it has also amplified conspiracy theories about claims of US-funded bioweapon labs in Ukraine, which last week expanded to involve claims about Hunter Biden, George Soros, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and Covid-19.

David Bandurski, analyst and editor of the China Media Project, said China's state media had been amplifying Russian sources "back to 2021", framing Russia's actions as primarily defensive by running Russian reports suggesting Nato was building a presence along the border.

"But pull back from the focus on events in Ukraine and you see that China has also played an active role in manufacturing disinformation to support the basic frames it has amplified about the conflict," he said, citing as example the bioweapons labs claims.

"The point here is to undermine US credibility over the longer term, and to push for a remaking of the international system. In this endeavour, Russia has been China's most intimate partner," said Bandurski.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Putin misinformed about Ukraine war?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/why-is-gchq-saying-putin-has-been-misinformed-about-ukraine-war
GIST	<p>For a spy chief, it was an eye-catching claim. "We believe Putin's advisers are afraid to tell him the truth," the GCHQ boss, Sir Jeremy Fleming, confidently declared overnight to an audience in Australia.</p> <p>The head of the British eavesdropping agency offered no details to back up his assertion – leaving the impression it was a piece of psychological warfare, of the "we know all is not well in the Kremlin" type.</p> <p>Nor was it an isolated comment – a few hours earlier US officials were in similar terrain, showing the effort was coordinated. "We have information that Putin felt misled by the Russian military," one said, stating that in particular the leader did not know at first that conscripts were being used in the war.</p>

Given Russia's failure to achieve a quick victory over [Ukraine](#), such conclusions are on the face of it hardly surprising. And the Russian president's dominance over the Kremlin and key figures within it is hardly a revelation.

Fleming's remarks are intended to bring to mind how the Russian president publicly treated Sergei Naryshkin, the head of the SVR foreign intelligence agency, at a meeting intended to agree the recognition of self-proclaimed republics in Ukraine.

[“Speak plainly,” a smirking Putin repeated](#) as Naryshkin stumbled over his answers to the Russian leader, perhaps enjoying the moment of fear that played across the face of his subordinate, normally considered a powerful hardliner who has known the president since the early 1990s at least.

GCHQ insiders are reluctant to get into detail at the best of times, although they insist such Kremlinology is not conducted idly. But it is hard to avoid the impression that such statements have a propagandist quality when they are inserted into a speech given by a spy chief and inevitably picked up by the media.

Fleming's speech also contained another unsupported statement, that Russian forces have been “even accidentally shooting down their own aircraft”, which intended to refer to more than one aircraft – a statement that can only have the purpose of highlighting to the Kremlin what the west believes it can see.

Former Whitehall insiders are divided about whether it is wise for intelligence chiefs to make such sweeping statements. “My view is that Fleming should only speak on the basis of intelligence or he risks misinforming the west,” said one former intelligence insider, who asked not to be named.

But Lord Ricketts, a former national security adviser, said it was obvious that Putin had become “isolated and intolerant of criticism” and said it was a “continuation of the pre-conflict practice of putting out the intel assessment without revealing the sources”.

It is certainly true that prewar western intelligence predictions have been proven correct. They forecast that Russia would, on Putin's orders, invade Ukraine and attempt to win a quick victory by encircling Kyiv and other major cities – although most thought the invaders would be more successful than has been proven.

But now Fleming appears to be seeking to personalise responsibility for the war. “It increasingly looks Putin has massively misjudged the situation,” the spy chief also said, again a fairly obvious comment, but arguably not very diplomatic given that almost any ceasefire and peace settlement will almost certainly have to involve the Russian leader.

There is also a risk that the west has become overconfident about Russian divisions and difficulties – and risked exaggerating claims, as happened in the run-up to the Iraq war. “It was true that an Iraqi unit had a 45-minute chemical weapon readiness order. That didn't mean what was [then said in parliament and reported in the media](#)”, the long-serving former official recalled.

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HEADLINE	04/01 China extends Covid lockdown in Shanghai
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/covid-lockdown-extended-for-parts-of-shanghai-as-city-struggles-to-control-omicron
GIST	<p>Shanghai has been plunged into an extended lockdown and some residents face another 10 days of isolation in their homes as China's strict zero-Covid policy threatens to derail the country's economy.</p> <p>The eastern half of China's biggest city had been due to emerge on Friday from a four-day lockdown aimed at crushing a persistent outbreak of the Omicron variant, but the extension was announced late on Thursday night.</p>

A lockdown of the western half of the city went ahead as planned on Friday morning, leaving a majority of the city's 26 million people still in lockdown in the latest sign that China's financial powerhouse is struggling to eliminate the outbreak.

The virus has forced lockdowns in several large cities this year, making the current outbreak the country's worst since the pandemic started in Wuhan in 2019 and threatening to derail the world's second-largest economy.

Figures released on Friday showed that factory activity in China slumped at the fastest pace in two years in March, as the resurgence of Covid and the economic fallout from the Ukraine war triggered sharp falls in production and demand.

A closely watched measure of output – the Caixin/Markit manufacturing purchasing managers' index (PMI) – fell from 50.4 in February to 48.1 in March, indicating the steepest rate of contraction since February 2020.

Economists at Morgan Stanley cut China's economic growth forecast for this year sharply, while Citigroup warned of risks to the second-quarter outlook.

Trinh Nguyen, senior economist at Natixis in Hong Kong, said China's zero-Covid policy was now the biggest risk to the Chinese economy and predicted worse was still to come.

"April is going to be horrible with the Shanghai lockdown extended," she said. "And this will reverberate regionally and globally as it impacts both demand and supply."

The German carmaker BMW has closed its plants in Shenyang, a north-eastern city in Liaoning province, because of pandemic controls.

The slowdown in China's economy has also caused the price of oil to fall as markets bet that the world's number two economy will not require as much fuel.

Bill Bishop, the respected China observer, said on Friday that concern about the outbreak in Shanghai had been heightened by reports in the Wall Street Journal that there had been deaths at a care facility in the city.

"The outbreak in Shanghai is getting worse, it looks likely lockdowns will be tightened and extended ..." he wrote in his weekly newsletter, Sinocism.

"The case number data from Shanghai already look a little strange, if the officials are also covering up deaths then this could get really bad."

The city said on Friday morning that it had recorded 4,144 asymptomatic cases and 358 symptomatic cases on Thursday, compared with 5,298 and 355 the previous day.

The changes to the rules in Shanghai mean that anyone living in a building where a positive case has been found will be required to stay home for 10 more days. Residents of other buildings in the same residential compound will be confined for three more days.

People living in the surrounding neighbourhood of a positive case will face less restrictive limits. They may be allowed out to shop for necessities, but only for a limited time on certain days.

About 16 million people will be tested during the lockdown in Puxi on the west side of the river in Shanghai. Residents are not allowed to leave their neighbourhoods or housing compounds during the four-day period, with groceries or meals delivered to their complexes.

Ma Chunlei, a senior Shanghai official, acknowledged shortcomings in the city's response. Authorities have rushed to bolster food deliveries to the city after panic buying stripped store shelves of necessities.

"We didn't prepare sufficiently enough," Ma said. "We sincerely accept the criticisms from the public and are making efforts to improve it."

There was some good news elsewhere in China when authorities announced the lifting of a citywide lockdown in the province that has been hardest hit.

Authorities in Jilin reportedly issued a notice saying that residents would be able to move about freely from Friday for the first time in more than three weeks. They will be required to wear masks and, when indoors, stay 1 meter (3 feet) apart. Public gatherings in parks and squares are prohibited.

The spread of Covid-19 has been brought under control in Jilin but not in the rest of Jilin province, officials said at a news conference. Some progress has been made in Changchun, the provincial capital and an auto manufacturing hub that has been locked down since 11 March.

By far, most of the cases in the ongoing outbreak have been in Jilin province, which borders North Korea in China's industrial northeast.

China on Thursday reported 8,559 new cases in the previous 24-hour period, of which 6,720 had no symptoms. The proportion of asymptomatic cases has been higher than in previous outbreaks, particularly in Shanghai. About 100 of the new cases were imported ones among people who had recently arrived from abroad.

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HEADLINE	03/31 UN falls short of target to aid Afghanistan
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/un-donor-conference-fails-to-reach-target-of-44bn-to-help-afghanistan
GIST	<p>The world's donor drought, and growing global divisions over Afghanistan's political direction, have been laid bare when a UN appeal for \$4.4bn (£3.35bn) to help Afghanistan fell massively short, the second UN donor conference in a month to do so.</p> <p>Donor countries pledged only \$2.44bn towards the appeal, a senior UN official said on Thursday after a high-level pledging conference.</p> <p>David Miliband – chief executive of the International Rescue Committee, one of the NGOs most active in Afghanistan – said: "The failure to properly fund the humanitarian appeal today will have immediate and devastating consequences for the Afghan people. This summit today offered a small window of opportunity to stave off further suffering in 2022, but this failure must hang heavy on the shoulders of donors."</p> <p>It follows a UN Yemen pledging conference a month ago which raised only \$1.3bn against a target of \$4.3bn, of which nearly \$600m came from the US alone.</p> <p>Some of the longstanding donors in the Middle East, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, appear to be holding back, although Qatar is heavily committed to the Afghan process and acted as a co-sponsor of Thursday's conference.</p> <p>In a sign of a growing global diplomatic split over Afghanistan, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, claimed the donor conference had been hastily assembled at a fortnight's notice and it was for Nato countries to clear up their mess in the country.</p> <p>"After 20 years of Nato's military presence and the failed experiment to impose prescriptions and values which were totally alien to the Afghan people, the 'collective west' bears direct responsibility for</p>

the current humanitarian situation and the deplorable state of the Afghan economy. Therefore, it must assume most of the financial burden for overcoming the crisis and bringing the situation back to normal.”

Lavrov also backed diplomatic recognition of the Taliban, so long as the government was made more representative of Afghan’s ethnic mix, but conspicuously did not make a Taliban fulfilment of its pledge to let older girls return to full-time education a precondition of recognition.

Speaking at a meeting of foreign ministers from Afghanistan’s neighbouring countries hosted by China, Lavrov questioned why the UN conference was being held on the same day as the neighbours’ conference, accusing the west of using the UN to create divisions.

At the UN conference, the UK pledged £286m, the US \$512m, Germany €200m and the EU €113m – all amounts that would ensure the appeal was going to fall well short.

The UN secretary general, António Guterres, had appealed for generosity at the start of the conference, saying the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan had “deteriorated alarmingly” and urged donors to provide “unconditional and flexible funding” towards its \$4.4bn appeal for aid. He said the Afghan economy had effectively collapsed and the country was in a death spiral.

The UN says more than 24.4 million people require humanitarian assistance to survive. Food security levels have plunged at a rate not seen elsewhere in such a short period, with half the population facing acute hunger, including 9 million people in emergency food insecurity – the highest number globally.

The donor conference was overshadowed by the Taliban’s surprise decision to maintain a ban on older girls’ education, setting back hopes that the Taliban might secure western diplomatic recognition and in turn make it easier for the west to help the country’s long-term development without the threat of sanctions.

The World Bank has already put on hold plans to spend \$600m to review the impact of the Taliban decision.

Annalena Baerbock, the German foreign minister, said: “Afghan girls were eager to get back to their classrooms last week: to return to their books, to resume their education and to see their classmates again. But when they arrived at their schools, they were sent home. It broke my heart to see the images of girls crying in front of their closed schools.

“But it also filled my heart with courage to see that many bravely took to the streets to demonstrate for their right to an education. Together with our partners, we urgently call upon the Taliban to grant equal access to education, everywhere in the country. The plight of girls is a dark illustration of the suffering of the Afghan people: the humanitarian crisis Afghans face is among the gravest in the world.”

Liz Truss, the UK foreign secretary, announcing the UK pledge, said: “Our potential to provide support will depend on how constructively the Taliban engage on key issues like the rights of women and girls and also ethnic and religious minorities.

“Women and girls are amongst the most marginalised groups. They have been denied opportunities in education and employment – which are key drivers of equality. No nation can succeed if half of its population is held back.”

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HEADLINE	04/01 Day 37 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/russia-ukraine-war-what-we-know-on-day-37-of-the-russian-invasion

- **The White House said the US has evidence that the war against Ukraine has been “a strategic disaster” for Russia.** “We have seen incontrovertible evidence that this has been a strategic disaster for Russia,” director of communications Kate Bedingfield said, adding that Russia is “working to redefine the initial aims of their invasion”.
- **US president Joe Biden said that Russian president Vladimir Putin “seems to be self-isolated”** and noted “there’s some indication that he has fired or put under house arrest some of his advisers,” without citing evidence.
- **UK defence secretary Ben Wallace said Putin was “not the force he used to be”** and a “man in a cage he built himself”. Wallace told Sky News: “He is isolated. His army is exhausted, he has suffered significant losses. He has not only got to live with the consequences of what he is doing to [Ukraine](#), but he has also got to live with the consequences of what he has done to his own army.”
- **Russia has threatened to halt contracts supplying Europe with a third of its gas unless they are paid in Russian currency.** Putin [signed a decree](#) on Thursday saying foreign buyers must pay in roubles for Russian gas from Friday. He said contracts would be halted if these payments were not made. [Germany and France rejected the demands](#) and said they amounted to “blackmail”.
- **Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy repeated his warning that Russia is preparing for “powerful strikes” in the Donbas region** after appearing to withdraw from an assault on Kyiv. The Pentagon also said that Russia may be repositioning some of its forces to send them to the Donbas.
- **Nato’s chief Jens Stoltenberg said Russian forces are not withdrawing, but regrouping.** He also said the alliance had yet to be convinced Russia was negotiating in good faith in peace talks in Istanbul because Moscow’s military objective since launching its invasion of Ukraine had not changed.
- **Peace talks between Russia and Ukraine were due to restart online on Friday morning.**
- **Russia is redeploying elements of its forces from Georgia to reinforce its invasion,** British military intelligence said on Thursday. “It is highly unlikely that Russia planned to generate reinforcements in this manner and it is indicative of the unexpected losses it has sustained during the invasion,” [the ministry added](#).
- **A humanitarian corridor is set to be opened from 10am on Friday morning to allow civilians out of the besieged port city of Mariupol, which is in the Donbas in south-eastern Ukraine.** It follows “a personal request from the French president and German chancellor to Russian president Vladimir Putin”, it said.
- **A convoy of Ukrainian buses has set out for Mariupol** to try to deliver humanitarian supplies and bring out trapped civilians, Ukraine’s deputy prime minister said.
- **EU and Chinese leaders will meet for a first summit in two years on Friday, with Brussels keen for assurances from Beijing that it will neither supply Russia with arms nor help Moscow circumvent western sanctions.** EU officials close to the preparations of the summit said any help given to Russia would damage China’s international reputation and jeopardise relations with its biggest trade partners – [Europe](#) and the United States.
- **Russian forces have reportedly left the Chernobyl power plant, the Ukrainian Atomic Energy Ministry said, citing personnel at the site.** Russian troops began leaving after soldiers got “significant doses” of radiation from digging trenches at the highly contaminated site, Ukraine’s state power company said. Energoatom said the Russians had dug in the forest inside the exclusion zone around the now-closed plant and “panicked at the first sign of illness,” which “showed up very quickly”. Energoatom later said Russian forces had taken Ukrainian soldiers as hostages when they left.
- **Britain and its allies have agreed to [send more lethal military aid to Ukraine](#)** to help defend it against Russia’s invasion, the British defence secretary, Ben Wallace, has said. As part of the agreement, armoured vehicles and long-range artillery will be sent.
- **Australian prime minister Scott Morrison has said Australia will send armoured four-wheel-drive Bushmaster vehicles to Ukraine** after Zelenskiy specifically asked for them during a video appeal to Australian lawmakers on Thursday. Morrison said the vehicles would be flown to Ukraine but didn’t specify how many would be sent or when.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • France’s military intelligence chief Gen Eric Vidaud is leaving his post after Paris failed to accurately predict – in contrast with western allies – that Russia would launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several sources with knowledge of his exit have said. • The Biden administration has approved the drawdown and sale of 30m barrels of petroleum from from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) citing a severe energy supply interruption due to the war.
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HEADLINE	03/31 Renton April ‘Hatch Day’ scavenger hunt
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3416176/renton-erasmus-dragon-hatch-day-scavenger-hunt/
GIST	<p>As the home of the Wizards of the Coast headquarters, the City of Renton has never been shy about its love of dragons, and starting on Friday, April 1, it will celebrate that with a dragon-centric scavenger hunt.</p> <p>The hunt will kick off as part of Renton’s yearly “Hatch Day” celebration, commemorating the 2019 unveiling of Erasmus, the city’s 710-pound metal dragon perched atop a 100-plus-year-old building downtown.</p> <p>Erasmus was the result of three years of work gathering funds, commissioning a group of local artists, working with the building’s owner, and finally, building the giant dragon itself.</p> <p>This year’s Hatch Day will task hunters with finding 10 different dragons stashed around downtown Renton “along the path to visit their rooftop friend on the corner of South 3rd and Wells Ave South.”</p> <p>You can download an official Hatch Day scorecard to keep track of your hunt here, or pick up a physical scorecard at Common Ground Cupcake & Coffee, Sparkle Gifts & Whatnot, or Wyldwood Creative. Once you complete the scorecard with each dragon’s corresponding number, email it to arts@rentonwa.gov by 12 p.m. on April 12 to be entered into a prize drawing. Winners will be announced the following day.</p> <p>There will also be a separate contest rewarding the best selfies with dragons during the hunt. Send any and all pictures to arts@rentonwa.gov with “Dragon Selfie” in the subject line to enter. All entries will be considered, and will be judged based on “creativity, thoughtfulness, display of effort, and general cuteness.” Three winners — which will be announced on Wednesday, April 13 — will each get a \$25 gift card for the downtown business of their choosing.</p> <p>You can check out more details on Renton’s Hatch Day festivities at this link.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Seattle, regional authority homeless divide
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3414584/king-county-regional-authority-seattle-approach-homeless-camps/
GIST	<p>In February, the City of Seattle and the King County Regional Homelessness Authority (KCRHA) announced a joint initiative with a collection of local businesses to stand up a new program known as “Partnership for Zero,” created to provide end-to-end outreach to people in downtown homeless camps. Just a month later, though, there’s been a significant divide between the city and the KCRHA’s shorter term priorities as the pace of encampment clearances has accelerated.</p> <p>The City of Seattle has conducted dozens of encampment removals since the start of Mayor Bruce Harrell’s term in 2022, under the justification that tents on sidewalks should not be allowed to obstruct public rights of way. And as Harrell’s office has pointed out, there is “no requirement for offers of shelter when an encampment is creating an obstruction,” leading to many removals being conducted with little to no prior outreach. In instances where the city’s HOPE Team has been on hand to provide referrals, only half have actually led to shelter placements over the last three months, a number which is likely even higher when combined with those who opted out of sharing their data with the city.</p> <p>Recent encampment removals have all also been part of a strategy that the KCRHA has voiced its explicit opposition to.</p>

“The authority has a stance, and that stance is very straightforward — it is articulated and not moving, and that is: we don’t support displacement-based strategy, full stop,” KCRHA CEO Marc Dones said in a media roundtable on Tuesday. “It’s not data-based, and it doesn’t produce the results that folks are after.”

Despite that difference in philosophies, Dones says that discussions with Harrell’s office on moving past the city’s existing approach have yielded positive results, albeit with a more future-facing timeline.

“We are in, I would say, frankly, a good conversation right now with the mayor’s office about how to get to that place,” they described. “I’m acknowledging that we are not currently there, but I believe that we all have some of the same end states in mind as to what we’d like to see.”

“I hope that there is a path to not using displacement-based strategies countywide, [or] anywhere,” Dones added. “Because we are in a place with a robust enough peer advocate workforce, we are able to be way ahead of that.”

More work to do on shelter spaces

The issue that’s cropped up as Seattle has ramped up its encampment removals, though, is twofold — first, the city rarely has more than a small handful of available shelter spaces to offer on any given day, and second, up until recently, the spaces outreach workers have been able to offer haven’t adequately met people’s needs.

“People say no [to referrals] because things don’t make sense for them — because they’re not good,” Dones said. “What we were offering people was a mat on a floor.”

“Imagine a mat on the floor was the thing that made sense,” they continued. “It’s not, but if that was a thing that made sense, we were also in most cases saying, ‘you have to be in by 7 p.m. and out by 6 a.m., there’s no place to store your things.’ That was the world, and people said, ‘that doesn’t make sense.’ It’s not supportive; there’s no way for that to become a foundation to reach any goal, housing or otherwise.”

That sentiment was echoed by REACH System Coordinator Dawn Shepard, citing her own experiences with congregate shelters.

“I can totally identify with why you don’t want to go into a congregate setting shelter, where someone’s going to be screaming in the middle of the night triggering your own PTSD, where everything that you put down and turn your back on is stolen, where you are not necessarily treated with the kindness and respect by the staff there, and that you have no place to store your belongings,” she described.

Meanwhile, efforts to expand shelter options have been slow to arrive. Seattle City Council approved funding for over 1,600 new non-congregate shelter units in 2021, but as Councilmember Andrew Lewis pointed out last year, “few of those shelter resources have been realized,” with efforts curtailed by a series of “bureaucratic bottlenecks” related to land use regulations, “NIMBY opposition,” and limited capacity from providers.

That’s what fueled Partnership for Zero, as part of a strategy to “push the reimagining of shelter” to offer alternative options like bridge housing, while providing a variety of other services and resources to put people on the path toward exiting homelessness.

Peer advocates

Underpinning that is a goal to ensure that even if someone turns down an offer of shelter, peer advocates — outreach workers with lived experiences of homelessness — can not only build trust and establish familiar relationships with those living in encampments, but remain in the equation down the line.

“Ideally, even if folks say no [to a shelter referral], the role of a peer advocate is to continue to stand in that space and not write people off just because they’re not accessing services and using that peer relationship,” KCRHA Peer Navigation Workforce Co-Director Joe Conniff explained. “Peer advocacy

remains at the forefront of continuing to stand in that space when folks are not ready or not willing to say yes, so you can continue to work with them and find whatever stability or quality of life improvements that can continue to happen in the interim.”

And as Dones further points out, the journey of someone experiencing homelessness is rarely a linear path, making it that much more important for them to have that advocate in their orbit.

“When we talk about what resources people have access to, there’s a fixity on this idea that people move from unsheltered, to sheltered, to permanent supportive housing, and it’s three steps — that is not what the experience of homelessness is for the vast majority of people,” they explained. “What we do know is that in spaces that are enriched with longitudinal navigation, people access other systems, other resources, or community supports, and resolve homelessness through the work of that dedicated [peer] advocate — that’s what gets the job done.”

“And so this idea that [navigation] workers are going to have some sort of golden ticket into a shelter system or a golden ticket into permanent supportive housing, I think is a result of a fixity on an idea of what it means to exit homelessness,” Dones continued. “That does not conform or comport with the experience of the people who have experienced homelessness, or with what we see in the system data.”

That sort of approach will also take time to fully realize, leaving the KCRHA with some difficult choices to make in the meantime as the city has continued to focus its efforts on clearing obstructive encampments.

“We recognize that there are folks today who are not going to benefit from the thing that might exist in four weeks,” Dones noted. “But I think what we’re all very focused on is getting to the level of system change and broader behavior change that gets to some of the roots of these patterns, as opposed to trying to put out the fire of the moment, and that’s a tough call.”

“It doesn’t always feel great to say, ‘I need to go to work and focus on the system,’ but that is the choice that we have made.”

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HEADLINE	04/01 Russia: Ukraine raided Russia territory
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-strikes-russian-military-depot-russians-say-11648804107
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine—Ukrainian attack helicopters executed a low-flying predawn raid on Russian territory Friday, a Russian official said, eluding air defenses to strike an oil depot and signaling Kyiv’s ability to broaden the field of the war.</p> <p>Security-camera footage released by Russian state-owned media channel RIA Novosti appeared to show several missiles firing at the depot and igniting explosions. Vyacheslav Gladkov, the regional governor of Belgorod, wrote on social media that two Ukrainian helicopters carried out the operation while flying at low altitude.</p> <p>Kyiv didn’t immediately comment on the attack. Belgorod is located close to the Ukrainian border with Russia and north of Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city.</p> <p>If confirmed, the Belgorod raid would be Kyiv’s second helicopter operation in as many days, following an attempt to penetrate Russian air defenses around the besieged city of Mariupol, along Ukraine’s Azov Sea coast.</p> <p>Ukraine flew two Mi-8 transport helicopters on a mission to evacuate members of the Azov battalion that has allowed the city to remain in Ukrainian control despite near-constant Russian bombardment of civilian sites.</p>

Using captured, shoulder-fired, U.S.-made Stinger antiaircraft weapons, members of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic downed one of the helicopters, according to the Russian Ministry of Defense.

The second aircraft also absorbed a missile strike and crashed a dozen miles from the coast, the ministry said.

The developments came as Ukrainian officials said their armed forces pressed against Russian military units around Kyiv, seeking to exploit Moscow's efforts to regroup after weeks of heavy losses.

In the Chernihiv region to the north of the capital, Ukrainian forces retook two villages and were pushing for further gains, officials said. Russian forces also [handed control of the Chernobyl nuclear power](#) plant back to Ukraine.

"The adversary has completely lost its offensive potential in the Kyiv region. It is trying to dig in and turn to defense in the places it has occupied," said Brig. Gen. Oleksandr Hruzevych, deputy chief of staff of the Ukrainian army.

Russia said it would decrease its attacks around Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, and Chernihiv as a goodwill gesture to facilitate peace talks while shifting focus to air and ground attacks in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine.

Negotiations between Russia and Ukraine are set to continue over videoconference Friday, Ukrainian officials say.

Ukrainian and Western officials say Russia was forced to curtail attempts to advance amid mounting losses of personnel and equipment and that its military was now seeking to dig in around Kyiv and Chernihiv to continue shelling the cities while redeploying some forces to the east.

Gen. Hruzevych said that nearly 700 Russian vehicles had departed in the direction of Belarus. He said the forces were likely to end up in Donbas.

Russian forces transferred control of Chernobyl to Ukrainian authorities on Thursday, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ukrainian state nuclear company Energoatom and workers at the plant, ending Russia's five-week occupation of the site.

Plant workers said all Russian troops had left the site by late Thursday, but they also said the departing forces had taken more than 100 Ukrainian national guard members away in trucks as prisoners of war.

One senior manager said the site was unguarded and that workers had locked the gates once the Russians had left. "The complex is left without armed guards," the manager said.

Russian forces seized the defunct plant, the site of the world's biggest nuclear accident in 1986, on the first day of the war and had detained dozens of workers, holding them at gunpoint and forcing them to work for weeks without a shift change.

The IAEA said its officials would visit the plant in the next few days.

In Ukraine's east, an area long coveted by Moscow, Russia has been intensifying attacks. Russian forces have been attacking the city of Lysychansk for the past two days. Shelling by Russian troops killed at least seven people and injured dozens overnight, officials said.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said Thursday that Russian forces had gained ground in their offensive to take swaths of Donbas and claimed further missile attacks against Ukrainian military infrastructure.

The statement came the day Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the spring draft, which is set to bring 134,500 new conscripts into the armed forces as others end their voluntary service. Russia has previously admitted that conscripts have taken part in its military campaign in Ukraine, though Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Tuesday that no new recruits would be sent to conflict zones.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said “there is an accumulation of Russian troops for new strikes in Donbas. And we are preparing for this.”

Ukrainian military officials said in some cases Russian troops are using artillery fire and mines to cover their withdrawal. Shelling of the city of Kharkiv also was continuing. Ukraine also said Russia was restocking its long-range missile inventory in Belarus, from where it has attacked Ukrainian targets.

Western officials aren’t convinced Russia has given up on efforts to take Kyiv.

President Biden said Thursday that there is no evidence that Mr. Putin is pulling back forces from the Ukrainian capital. “Depending on your view of Putin, I’m a little skeptical,” Mr. Biden said.

Jens Stoltenberg, secretary-general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, on Thursday said Russian troops were regrouping for operations in the Donbas region. “At the same time, Russia maintains pressure on Kyiv and other cities. So we can expect additional offensive actions, bringing even more suffering.”

There has been little progress on the diplomatic front to bring about a cessation of fighting. After peace talks on Tuesday spurred hope an agreement may be an emerging possibility, the Kremlin a day later said no turning point had been achieved. And several Western countries, which Ukraine wants as security guarantors for any peace deal, have been skeptical about providing broad promises to rush to the country’s defense.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Thursday he would try to talk to Messrs. Putin and Zelensky to broker a meeting between the two. Turkey, he said, would be willing to be one of the security guarantors in a peace deal, though details still need to be clarified.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said any such meeting should be preceded by a finalized agreement between Russia and Ukraine. “Only after that can there be talk of a high-level summit,” he said Thursday.

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HEADLINE	04/01 Russia military struggles to supply forces
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/behind-the-front-lines-russias-military-struggles-to-supply-its-forces-11648805401
GIST	<p>Russia’s army has suffered serious losses as it has battled fierce Ukrainian resistance. Behind the front lines, a less visible failure in supplying and maintaining the troops in the field has critically hobbled Moscow’s invasion plans, according to Western intelligence assessments.</p> <p>Russia’s weaknesses in logistics—the tail of support and services that enable combat forces to live, move, communicate and fight—were evident just days after the invasion was launched on Feb. 24. They have continued weeks into the campaign, according to Western officials and private military analysts.</p> <p>After failing to rapidly capture the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, and oust the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky, Russia now says it will focus its military efforts on what it now calls its primary objective, the “liberation of the Donbas” area in the country’s east.</p> <p>While analysts warn that their understanding of the invasion is incomplete, the evidence for shortcomings in Russian logistics is evident in verified social-media footage of stalled Russian convoys and broken-down tanks, some confirmed by commercial satellite photographs. Russian forces have struggled with the transport of fuel and ammunition as well as food and clothing for soldiers at the front.</p>

“We continue to see indications that the Russians did not properly plan for logistics and sustainment,” said Pentagon press spokesman John Kirby in late March. “We know that they continue to have fuel issues across their force, and that they are still struggling with food.”

Russian towns near the border with Ukraine have organized drives to deliver food, clothes, socks and footwear to soldiers who have been on operations or exercises for months, while individual volunteers have coordinated over Russian social media site VK to collect and distribute food and clothing.

Russia’s military doesn’t seem to have overcome many of the logistical problems suffered by the Red Army, analysts say. Over history, logistical problems have undermined many military campaigns, with armies facing tight budgets sometimes skimping on logistics to focus on new weapons and fighting forces.

In Ukraine, Russia began the war by mounting a complex multipronged offensive using land, air and seaborne forces. It quickly lost steam.

“The last time the Russian army did something this big was the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 where there wasn’t an active enemy,” said Ben Barry, senior fellow for land warfare at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Mr. Barry said more than 170,000 Russian troops are estimated to have been committed to Ukraine in about 130 units, known as battalion tactical groups. When the U.S. and its allies invaded Iraq in 2003, similar numbers of U.S. troops were committed in fewer than 50 BTGs. The reason for the difference: the large proportion of the U.S. force being used for logistics and the transportation of fuel, ammunition, water and food.

Phillips O’Brien, professor of strategic studies at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, said military experts may have been deceived by the “lavish logistical system” employed by the U.S. in the past three decades. “What the U.S. has done has made people immune to looking at the reality of logistics and just assuming it will get done,” he said.

He said the complexity of the Russian operation compounded problems of logistics. “What they were actually trying to do was logistically bonkers. They were trying to support five or six different axes of advance in a hugely spread-out arch, all the way from west of Kyiv, all of that bulge of eastern Ukraine, down to Crimea.”

Mark Galeotti, senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, a London-based security think tank, said Russia’s announced plans to focus fighting on the east, if realized, would help Moscow pivot away from the tenuous lines that have been stretched out to support the assault on Kyiv and focus more on Donbas to ease logistical problems.

Almost all outside experts have concluded that Russia’s initial war plan—a lightning strike by airborne units into Kyiv that would meet little resistance and quickly decapitate the government—wouldn’t have needed such elaborate supply lines.

“They [invaded] profoundly unready for sustained offensive operations,” said Scott Boston, a defense analyst at the Rand Corp. Some units ran out of fuel on day three of the campaign.

The Ukrainian defense also harassed stretched Russian supply lines from the side and rear. Many military analysts suspect this was part of Ukraine’s battle plan and no accident, though some Ukrainian units may have been left behind by Russia’s rapid advance and decided on their own to harass vulnerable supply and fuel trucks. Partisans also got into the act.

Russian forces at home are heavily reliant on rail for moving supplies around. Except in the south where Russian forces secured the city of Kherson, Moscow wasn’t able to secure any other major railheads, leaving it dependent on roads and trucks.

Logistical problems multiplied and were worsened by poor communications. “The more you advance, the more you extend your logistical line, the higher the complexity,” said Yohann Michel, a research analyst at IISS.

With little evidence that Russian forces established their own supply dumps inside Ukraine, resupply trucks had to shuttle long distances back and forth, themselves needing to refuel. Clips on social media also show much of this equipment was poorly maintained, perhaps coming out of yearslong storage.

“If one truck shows up and fuels three or four vehicles and then turns around and goes back, I don’t know how long you think you can do this,” said Mr. Boston. The farther the journeys, the more challenging the refueling—particularly when supply lines haven’t been secured.

Military analysts say there are special challenges to supplying heavily motorized forces like the Russians have extensively deployed in Ukraine. While Russian tanks in Ukraine are generally lighter than their Western counterparts, their tracked vehicles aren’t fuel efficient—increasing the challenge of keeping them active.

While fuel consumption will depend on speed and terrain, tanks are huge gas guzzlers. Mr. Boston says that, as a rough estimate, a T-72B variant tank—the workhorses in Ukraine—would use 5.8 gallons per hour just to idle, and 1 mile a gallon or significantly less when moving.

Two elite regiments appear to have been particularly plagued by breakdowns.

Mr. Boston said the 12th and 13th tank regiments, both part of the Fourth Tank Division and the only formations using T80U tanks, suffered heavy losses in the campaign as they moved westward from the Russian border.

More than 40 of the units’ tanks were abandoned or captured undamaged, according to reports verified by the Oryx website. These tanks have powerful gas-turbine engines but there is a major downside—very heavy fuel consumption.

“It’s like a full third of those vehicles in those two regiments may have just run out of gas,” Mr. Boston said.

After its first lightning strike failed, Russia switched to one of its old standbys: using artillery. Most Russian artillery strikes use unguided weapons that can extract a huge human toll when attacking cities—without necessarily achieving any useful strategic objective.

They also create an onerous demand on logistics. Artillery ammunition is enormously heavy and some big Russian systems can consume tons of it rapidly. A rocket launcher such as the self-propelled BM-27 Uragan can fire its 16 barrels in minutes. “To refuel it, you basically require a lorry just as big to carry the same number of rockets,” said Mr. Barry.

Even a shell for a 152 mm howitzer weighs about 100 pounds. Each gun will carry about 50 rounds, and a brigade several thousand, Mr. Boston said.

He said the Russian military gives priority to logistics bringing ammunition to artillery units. “The demand for bringing the artillery in means you now have a competing demand for logistics. They’re obviously not the same trucks as the fuel trucks but you obviously have to get it there,” Mr. Boston said.

The Russian reliance on unguided munitions is cheaper—but piles pressure on logistics. “They might need to fire 60 rounds to get the same effect as we do from one [precision] round. “Obviously that gets very difficult from the sustainment perspective,” he said.

“It’s also profoundly unsafe. You hit a Russian vehicle full of ammo, it will just explode.”

	Mr. Michel of IISS said the Ukrainians shouldn't assume the Russians won't adapt in the face of their logistical struggles. "The Russian armed forces are usually good at learning lessons," he said.
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HEADLINE	04/01 Car sales hit by supply-chain woes
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/car-sales-seen-sputtering-as-supply-chain-woes-hurt-production-11648805401?mod=hp_lead_pos3
GIST	<p>Auto makers are expected to report weak vehicle sales for the quarter as chip shortages and supply-chain issues continue to limit vehicle production.</p> <p>Sales of new vehicles are projected to fall 16% in the first quarter from the year-ago period and represent the second-worst quarterly total in a decade, behind the pandemic-affected second quarter of 2020, according to Cox Automotive.</p> <p>"Make no mistake, this market is stuck in low gear," Cox Automotive senior economist Charlie Chesbrough said. Auto makers are dealing with supply-chain disruptions that have pinched inventories, a dynamic that could worsen with the Ukraine war and Covid-19-related shutdowns in China, analysts say.</p> <p>The rate of sales is expected to slow in the first quarter to 12.7 million annually, according to J.D. Power. In comparison, auto makers last year sold just shy of 15 million vehicles in the U.S., the firm said, up slightly from 2020. For five straight years before the pandemic, the industry had eclipsed the mark of 17 million vehicles.</p> <p>The industry tracks the annualized sales rate as a measure of market strength from month to month because it strips out seasonal factors.</p> <p>Most auto makers are expected to report their sales numbers Friday, with the exception of Ford Motor Co., which plans to report on Monday.</p> <p>The sales slowdown is more about production than demand, analysts say. Drivers are snatching up available vehicles as soon as they hit the lot. In the first quarter, 41% of all new vehicles were sold within the first week of sitting on a dealer lot, compared with 20% in the first quarter of 2021, according car-buying website Edmunds.com</p> <p>"Nobody is worried about where their next sale is coming from, they're worried about where their next car is coming from," said Paul Walser, former chairman of the National Automotive Dealers Association.</p> <p>Edmunds forecasts a 15.2% decrease in first-quarter sales from the same period in 2021, decreasing from 3.9 million to 3.3 million vehicles sold.</p> <p>March is typically a busy time for the auto industry with increased promotions. Last year the industry had a blowout spring, with the selling pace approaching prepandemic levels.</p> <p>Dealers and car companies continue to report strong earnings, as built-up demand for the existing inventory of used and new cars lifts prices. Consumers are predicted to spend \$45.7 billion on new vehicles in March, the second-highest total for the month of March, behind last year, according to J.D. Power.</p> <p>"Given the strong demand and extremely constrained inventory situation, it should be no surprise that manufacturer discounts are at their lowest level ever, while prices and profitability set records for the month of March," said Thomas King, president of the data and analytics division at J.D. Power.</p> <p>The average new car price is about \$44,700, according to Cox, with a total available inventory of 1.1 million vehicles, down 59% from the same period in 2021. The average listing for a used vehicle sits at</p>

\$27,600, the firm said, with 2.62 million unsold used vehicles available, a nearly 5% increase from March 2021.

Also affected are car leases, which are at their lowest level since 2009. Average lease payments have soared during the pandemic as auto makers dropped the incentives that typically make leasing a more affordable option, reducing the way many buyers enter the market.

Last year, Toyota Motor Corp. overtook General Motors Co. in sales for the first time, benefiting from its decision to stockpile the computer chips that are integral to vehicle electronic systems. The first-quarter performance of the two global auto-making giants is being watched following this historic shift, one that a Toyota executive said he doesn't expect to be long lasting.

"To be clear, this is not our goal, nor do we see it as sustainable," Jack Hollis, Toyota's senior vice president of operations in North America, said in January.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Mortgage rates surge highest since 2018
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/mortgages-rates-surge-to-highest-since-2018-11648735335?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>The average rate for a 30-year fixed-rate home loan jumped to 4.67%, mortgage-finance giant Freddie Mac said Thursday, marking the weekly figure's highest reading since December 2018.</p> <p>The increase extends the 2022 surge in mortgage rates. The rise is hardly shocking, given the record low rates reached in the pandemic period and concerns about high U.S. inflation readings. But it has been faster than many analysts expected. At the beginning of the year, the average rate on America's most popular home loan was 3.22%.</p> <p>Over time, higher mortgage rates typically slow home-buying activity. But for now, there are ample signs that the U.S. home boom, featuring surging prices, ultralow inventories and persistent demand around the country, is far from over.</p> <p>That is likely good news for the industry and the economy in the near term, but rising rates stand to further reduce affordability at a time when many lower-income households are already stretched.</p> <p>"It's going to take a pretty healthy increase in rates to moderate the demand," said Phil Shoemaker, president of originations at Homepoint Financial Corp., a Michigan-based mortgage lender.</p> <p>The 30-year fixed rate rose from 4.42% a week ago, extending a steady rise that has pushed home-loan rates within sight of 5% for the first time in four years.</p> <p>So far, higher rates haven't dented consumer interest. The number of applications submitted by hopeful home buyers has risen for three of the past four weeks, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association trade group. Mortgage credit availability, a measure of lenders' willingness to issue home loans, rose in February to its highest level since last May, the MBA said, though it remains far below recent highs.</p> <p>Expectations that the Federal Reserve will raise interest rates several more times this year to control inflation are driving up mortgage rates. Before the central bank raised rates for the first time since 2018, the Fed's decision to unwind its purchases of mortgage-backed securities had started forcing rates upward.</p> <p>Rising rates are reducing home-loan refinancings, which powered much of the mortgage market's boom in 2020 and 2021. About four million Americans could lower their monthly mortgage payments through a refinancing in February, down from close to 16 million a year ago, according to mortgage-data firm Black Knight Inc. Refinancings are expected to make up 33% of mortgage originations this year, down from 59% in 2021, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association.</p>

Faced with high prices, rising rates and declining application volumes, lenders are expanding product offerings and relaxing some borrower eligibility requirements.

Financing options that allow for bigger loans or lower upfront payments can extend consumers' purchasing power and cushion the impact of the large price increases of the past two years. Lenders are aiming to boost business to offset shrinking volume and reduced profit margins.

They are also seeking to appeal to buyers whose finances haven't kept pace with the 15% rise over the past year in the median sales price of an existing house. Rising home prices are making homeownership a long shot for many Americans.

"The idea of loosening requirements at a time when the real-estate market has been going gangbusters...can give you flashbacks to 2005 and 2006," said Greg McBride, chief financial analyst at Bankrate.com. But "credit is significantly tighter," he added.

Rising mortgage rates typically reduce lending, because fewer homeowners can save money through refinancings and higher rates can discourage potential buyers.

Lenders want to find products "to make sure they get enough volume and keep their doors open," said Mike Fratantoni, chief economist at the MBA.

An increase in offerings for jumbo loans, those too big to qualify for a traditional government loan, and adjustable-rate mortgages have driven the expansion of mortgage credit, the MBA said. Lenders are increasingly easing minimum credit scores and allowing borrowers to take out larger loans relative to the value of the homes they are buying.

Still, Americans who want to buy a home this spring face plenty of challenges. At the current sales pace, the supply of homes on the market would last 1.6 months, a record low, according to the National Association of Realtors.

The median American household would need to devote 34% of its income to cover monthly payments on a median-price home in January, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. That is the highest since November 2008. Consumer lenders made lending standards stricter when the pandemic first hit, worried that a wave of unemployed workers wouldn't be able to make good on their loan payments. In the mortgage market, some banks restricted refinances on jumbo loans to customers with hundreds of thousands of dollars on hand.

After the initial shock to the mortgage market, ultralow rates and a flood of refinance and purchase applications meant lenders could be picky with their offerings and the type of borrowers they approved.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Ukraine troops push forward
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukrainian-forces-press-advances-as-russia-regroups-11648721863?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos4
GIST	<p>Ukrainian officials said their armed forces are pressing forward against Russian military units around Kyiv, seeking to exploit Moscow's efforts to regroup after weeks of heavy losses, while Russian forces handed control of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant back to Ukraine.</p> <p>After taking back the city of Irpin to the northwest of Kyiv this week, Ukrainian forces are now engaged in heavy fighting in the neighboring towns of Bucha and Hostomel, officials said.</p> <p>In the Chernihiv region to the north of the capital, Ukrainian forces retook two villages and were pushing for further gains, officials said.</p>

“We have completely destroyed the enemy’s plans,” said Brig. Gen. Oleksandr Hruzevych, deputy chief of staff of the Ukrainian army. “The adversary has completely lost its offensive potential in the Kyiv region. It is trying to dig in and turn to defense in the places it has occupied.”

Russia said it would decrease its attacks around Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, and Chernihiv as a goodwill gesture to facilitate peace talks while shifting focus to air and ground attacks in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine.

Negotiations between Russia and Ukraine are set to continue over videoconference Friday, Ukrainian officials say.

Ukrainian and Western officials say Russia was forced to curtail attempts to advance amid mounting losses of personnel and equipment and that its military was now seeking to dig in around Kyiv and Chernihiv to continue shelling the cities while redeploying some forces to the east.

Gen. Hruzevych said that nearly 700 Russian vehicles had departed in the direction of Belarus overnight. He said the forces were likely to end up in Donbas.

Russian forces transferred control of Chernobyl to Ukrainian authorities on Thursday, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ukrainian state nuclear company Energoatom and workers at the plant, ending Russia’s five-week occupation of the site.

Plant workers said all Russian troops had left the site by late Thursday, but they also said the departing forces had also taken more than 100 Ukrainian national guard members away in trucks as prisoners of war.

One senior manager said the site was unguarded and that workers had locked the gates once the Russians had left. “The complex is left without armed guards,” the manager said.

Russian forces seized the defunct plant, the site of the world’s biggest nuclear accident in 1986, on the first day of the war and had detained dozens of workers, holding them at gunpoint and forcing them to work for weeks without a shift change.

The IAEA said its officials would visit the plant in the next few days.

In Ukraine’s east, an area long coveted by Moscow, Russia has been intensifying attacks. Russian forces have been attacking the city of Lysychansk for the past two days. Shelling by Russian troops killed at least seven people and injured dozens overnight, officials said.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said Thursday that Russian forces had gained ground in their offensive to take swaths of Donbas and claimed further missile attacks against Ukrainian military infrastructure.

The statement came the day Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the spring draft, which is set to bring 134,500 new conscripts into the armed forces as others end their voluntary service. Russia has previously admitted that conscripts have taken part in its military campaign in Ukraine, though Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Tuesday that no new recruits will be sent to conflict zones.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky overnight said “there is an accumulation of Russian troops for new strikes in Donbas. And we are preparing for this.”

Ukrainian military officials said in some cases Russian troops are using artillery fire and mines to cover their withdrawal. Shelling of the city of Kharkiv also was continuing. Ukraine also said Russia was restocking its long-range missile inventory in Belarus, from where it has attacked Ukrainian targets.

Western officials aren’t convinced Russia has given up on efforts to take Kyiv.

President Biden said Thursday that there is no evidence that Mr. Putin is pulling back forces from the Ukrainian capital. “Depending on your view of Putin, I’m a little skeptical,” Mr. Biden said.

“Russian forces continue to hold positions to the east and west of Kyiv despite the withdrawal of a limited number of units,” the British Defense Ministry said. “Heavy fighting will likely take place in the suburbs of the city in coming days.”

Jens Stoltenberg, secretary-general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, on Thursday said Russian troops were regrouping for operations in the Donbas region. “At the same time, Russia maintains pressure on Kyiv and other cities. So we can expect additional offensive actions, bringing even more suffering.”

There has been little progress on the diplomatic front to bring about a cessation of fighting. After peace talks on Tuesday spurred hope an agreement may be an emerging possibility, the Kremlin a day later said no turning point had been achieved. And several Western countries, which Ukraine wants as security guarantors for any peace deal, have been skeptical about providing broad promises to rush to the country’s defense.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Thursday he would try to talk to Messrs. Putin and Zelensky to broker a meeting between the two. Turkey, he said, would be willing to be one of the security guarantors in a peace deal, though details still need to be clarified.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said any such meeting should be preceded by a finalized agreement between Russia and Ukraine. “Only after that can there be talk of a high-level summit,” he said Thursday.

Ukraine allies met in London on Thursday to pledge more military assistance to the country. British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said 35 countries were now part of a group offering to provide military aid, as the U.K. organized a donors conference.

“There will be more lethal aid going into Ukraine,” he told Sky News. Long-range artillery ammunition, coastal-defense equipment, more anti-aircraft missiles and protected vehicles are among the items that would be provided, he said.

The U.S. levied another round of sanctions on Thursday, targeting Russian technology companies and individuals that Washington said are attempting to help Moscow evade the West’s economic pressure campaign.

The White House on Wednesday said it was declassifying information that Mr. Putin was being misinformed by advisers. Hours later, Jeremy Fleming, the head of Britain’s eavesdropping spy agency, GCHQ, said “we believe Putin’s advisers are afraid to tell him the truth.”

Mr. Biden said Thursday that there was a lot of speculation on the subject.

“I’m not saying this with a certainty. He seems to be self-isolating,” Mr. Biden said. “And there’s some indication that he has fired, or put under house arrest, some of his advisers.”

Mr. Fleming also said Russia’s Wagner Group, the private military organization made up heavily of former Russian special forces, was preparing to send a large number of fighters to Ukraine to operate alongside Moscow’s regular troops.

Moscow, meanwhile, moved to put more economic pressure on some of the countries that support Ukraine, and to shore up its own economy, with Mr. Putin signing a decree requiring countries designated as “unfriendly” to pay for energy imports in rubles starting April 1. How strictly the new rules will be enforced wasn’t clear. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on Thursday said payments for Russian gas would continue in dollars and euros, adding that he had made that position clear to Mr. Putin when they spoke.

	<p>Moscow also said it was banning entry to several high-ranking EU officials, lawmakers, prominent media figures and other Europeans it accused of advancing anti-Russian policies.</p> <p>Russia announced a cease-fire around Mariupol starting 10 a.m. local time on Thursday aimed at allowing civilians who had spent weeks under Russian bombardment to leave for the city of Zaporizhzhia some 140 miles to the northwest. Further humanitarian corridors would be opened, said Mikhail Mizintsev, head of the Russian Defense Ministry's National Defense Control Center.</p> <p>The International Committee of the Red Cross said thousands of people remain trapped in Mariupol, where images show one of the organization's warehouses was damaged. Russian forces have been trying to take the southeastern port city since the opening days of their assault on Ukraine that began Feb. 24. Ukrainian troops still control the center of the city.</p> <p>Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk on Wednesday said three humanitarian corridors were agreed upon for people to leave some cities, including Mariupol. Some 10.5 million people have been displaced by the fighting, according to the United Nations, including more than 4 million refugees who have left the country.</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Eurozone inflation rate hits new record high
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/eurozone-inflation-hits-new-record-raising-pressure-on-ecb-11648807405?mod=hp_major_pos1#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>The eurozone's inflation rate jumped to another record high in March as Russia's invasion of Ukraine pushed energy and food prices higher, increasing pressure on the European Central Bank to raise its key interest rate.</p> <p>Russia accounts for around 40% of the European Union's imports of natural gas, a key source of energy for the bloc. It also supplies around a quarter of the bloc's oil imports. While supplies of oil and gas have continued to flow from Russia into Europe, market prices have risen, reflecting worries about future availability.</p> <p>The European Union's statistics agency on Friday said consumer prices were 7.5% higher in March than a year earlier, a jump from the 5.9% rate of inflation recorded in February.</p> <p>It was the fifth straight month the inflation rate hit a new high in a data series that goes back to the start of 1997, two years before the euro was launched. National figures suggest that the current rate of inflation could be even higher. Germany's measure of inflation for March was the highest since 1981, while Spain's was the highest since May 1985.</p> <p>"Inflation keeps on coming in stronger than we've expected and all the other forecasters have expected," said Jack Allen-Reynolds, an economist at Capital Economics. "So that implies there'll be an even bigger hit to household incomes and possibly a bigger hit to consumption."</p> <p>Much of the pickup in inflation has been driven by energy prices, which were 44.7% higher than a year earlier, having been 32% higher in February. Food-price inflation also picked up, to 5% in March from 4.2% in February. Russia and Ukraine are big exporters of wheat, and difficulties transporting that grain through the Black Sea and other routes, as well as the possibility that Ukraine won't be able to plant for next year's harvest, have pushed global prices higher.</p> <p>The U.S. has yet to release figures for March, but in February the annual rate of inflation rose to 7.9%, its highest since January 1982. While consumer prices in the U.S. have been rising as rapidly as in the eurozone, so have wages, leaving eurozone workers facing a larger loss of real spending power.</p>

Late last year, ECB policy makers had been counting on a decline in energy prices—as demand for winter heating fuels eased toward the end of March—to help reverse the rise in inflation and bring it back to its 2% target by the end of this year.

Russia’s war in Ukraine has dashed those hopes. The ECB’s economists now expect the inflation rate to average 5.1% this year, having raised their forecast from the 3.1% projected in December. Economists said a 7.1% increase is possible if energy prices are higher than they assume.

The invasion also means economic growth should be weaker than the ECB had expected at the start of the year, largely because high energy and food bills will reduce the amounts households can spend on other goods and services.

With inflation set to accelerate further, investors and traders increasingly expect the ECB to raise its key interest rate this year. The central bank last month announced a reduction in its purchases of bonds that could see the program end in the three months through September. At that time, it said a rise in its key rate could follow “some time” after the end of bond purchases.

Recent falls in the prices of government bonds suggest investors now anticipate two or more rate rises this year, each of a quarter of a percentage point, followed by as many as three in 2023.

The ECB’s biggest worry is that higher energy prices will push workers to ask for larger wage rises than they have received recently and that businesses already facing higher energy costs will raise their prices to preserve their profits, setting off a further round of wage demands.

Those worries are partly fed by a jobs market that was strengthening before Russia’s invasion. Figures released by Eurostat Thursday showed the eurozone’s unemployment rate fell to a record low of 6.8% as 181,000 workers found jobs. The decline had been particularly rapid among younger workers over the previous 12 months, with the unemployment rate for people aged 25 years or under falling to 14% in February from 18.6% a year earlier. That drop was more than three times as large as for the working-age population as a whole.

Despite the steady fall in the unemployment rate over the past year, workers aren’t getting bigger pay increases for now. The ECB’s own measure of pay deals negotiated by labor unions and similar groups recorded a modest 1.5% increase in 2021, the smallest rise since 2017.

ECB officials have stressed that they could also respond to the impact of the war on the economy by providing more stimulus, rather than withdrawing it.

“We should also be fully prepared to appropriately revise our monetary policy settings if the energy price shock and the Russia-Ukraine war were to result in a significant deterioration in macroeconomic prospects and thereby weaken the medium-term inflation outlook,” ECB chief economist Philip Lane said in a speech Thursday.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Experts: Russia war in tactics from Syria
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/31/russia-ukraine-mariupol-siege-aleppo-syria/
GIST	<p>The stories from people fleeing Mariupol are harrowing: dwindling food supplies. No electricity or water. Russian tanks roaming the streets. Nights punctuated by shelling.</p> <p>For Syrians, the accounts of life in the southeastern Ukrainian city, besieged by Russian forces, sound eerily familiar. Rights groups, officials and observers have drawn comparisons to the brutal tactics Russia deployed to turn the tide of the Syrian civil war in favor of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.</p> <p>“We’re staggered by really the amount of similarities,” said Daniel Balson, advocacy director for Europe and Central Asia at Amnesty International.</p>

The conflicts are not the same: In Ukraine, Russia launched a ground invasion and has sustained significant casualties, while in Syria, where Russia intervened in 2015, it mostly offered air support.

But Russia continues to employ weapons and strategies honed on Syrian cities to deadly effect.

Syrians “have the best experience in dealing with the Russian targeting of civilian neighborhoods,” said Farouq Habib, deputy chair of external relations for the Syria Civil Defense, the volunteer search-and-rescue group known as the White Helmets.

Ukrainian officials have warned that Mariupol is “becoming a second Aleppo.” Manolis Androulakis, Greece’s consul general in Mariupol who became the last European Union diplomat to leave the city this month, said it will join Aleppo as “part of a list of cities that were completely destroyed by war.”

The Syrian metropolis came to symbolize the willingness of Russian and Syrian forces to use ruthless tactics against civilians.

In 2016, during a nearly six-month siege of opposition-held parts of Aleppo, Syria’s largest city before the war, Russian forces attacked factories and water stations and cut off supply lines, leaving 250,000 residents with severe shortages of food, medicines and fuel. Humanitarian catastrophe followed.

In Mariupol, Russian forces have surrounded and bombarded the city, cutting off communications, water, gas and electricity, and preventing aid convoys from entering. Reports have emerged of residents melting snow for drinking water, rationing food among hungry children and running out of vital medicines.

Other Ukrainian cities, such as Chernihiv, face similar conditions. Secretary of State Antony Blinken accused Russia this month of “starving” Ukrainian cities.

Russia has attacked medical facilities in both Aleppo and Mariupol, as well as schools and buildings where civilians had taken refuge — such as the theater Ukrainian authorities say Russia bombed in Mariupol — in a “complete violation” of the international principle that “belligerents have an obligation to distinguish between military and civilian targets,” Balson said.

Syria also provided a testing ground for weapons Russia is using in Ukraine. Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu said in August that Russia had tested more than 300 weapons in Syria, Russian state media reported.

As in Syria, “a lot of the civilian casualties that we’re documenting [in Ukraine] are being caused by dumb bombs — not targeted weapons,” Balson said. “It’s impossible to use such weapons in these heavily built-up areas while ensuring that no civilians lose their lives.”

In 2016, Human Rights Watch accused Russia and Syria of killing more than 440 civilians, among them more than 90 children, in a month-long bombing campaign in Aleppo.

Civilian harm monitor Airwars said in a report published last week that nearly 25,000 civilians have allegedly been killed by Russian strikes in Syria since 2015.

Russia and Syria deliberately bombed civilian areas, including medical facilities, and used indiscriminate weapons such as cluster munitions and incendiary bombs, HRW found. Russia’s alleged use of “vacuum” and cluster munitions in Ukraine has drawn scrutiny in part because of the damage the weapons wreaked in Syria.

Five years after Russia began bombing Syria, the United Nations’ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria accused Russia of committing war crimes through its indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas. But no Russian officials have faced trial.

Russia has also been accused of violating international law in Ukraine. Moscow has denied committing war crimes in Syria and said its forces are not targeting civilians in Ukraine.

Russian and Ukrainian officials said they had agreed to a temporary cease-fire Thursday, to allow aid in and evacuees out.

Habib said that fixating global attention on the establishment of humanitarian corridors, and away from efforts to end hostilities or to establish safe zones, plays into Moscow's hands, in strategic terms.

"They want to empty those cities of their population, so it will be less costly for Russia to take over," Habib said of Russian authorities.

The war in Syria has forced 6.6 million Syrians to flee the country, according to the United Nations, with large numbers heading to Europe following Russia's intervention in September 2015. More than 4 million people fled Ukraine in just over a month of fighting, the United Nations said Wednesday. Three-quarters of Mariupol's population have left the city, according to some estimates.

The refugee exodus is a sign of Russia "exporting the problem," Habib said. As it did in Syria, Russia will seek to portray civilians who stay behind as enemy combatants — and therefore legitimate targets, warned Hanna Notte, senior research associate at the Vienna Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation.

Another element of Russia's Syria playbook on display in Ukraine: disinformation. In Syria, Russia and allies portrayed the White Helmets as terrorists. In Ukraine, the Kremlin has cast Ukrainian officials and soldiers as Nazis.

International law and conflict experts have raised concerns that the lack of accountability for Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions in Syria emboldened the Russian leader. Balson pointed to what he described as a broader pattern of Russian forces killing civilians with impunity, stretching back to its siege of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, in 1999.

"When the Russian government has intervened," he said, "there has been long-standing, well-documented incidences and patterns of human beings losing their lives, losing access to their resources, losing access to their homes."

In the lead-up to the Ukraine invasion, observers speculated that Putin might be less willing to kill Ukrainians because of the cultural and family ties they share with Russians.

That hasn't proved to be the case. The United Nations said 1,189 civilians had been killed as of Wednesday in Ukraine, in what officials say is a vast undercount. Local officials in Mariupol estimate that 5,000 people have been killed in that city alone.

Still, Ukraine is in many ways better positioned to counter Russian attacks than Syrians were. Ukrainians have taken refuge in bunkers and deep subway systems built to withstand missiles and bombs. And they've put up a fierce and unified resistance, defying Russian and Western expectations.

Unlike the Syria conflict — which Russia fought at relatively low cost by attacking from the sky while Syrian forces and allied militias attacked from the ground — Russia has sent tens of thousands of ground troops into Ukraine, where they are suffering heavy losses.

But as Russian casualties mount and ground offenses falter, experts said, Putin may continue to pivot toward fighting the type of air war he waged in Syria.

"He's started to resort to the Syria low-cost tactics," said Natasha Hall, senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

	<p>But Ukraine has received greater international attention and backing than did opposition groups and civilians in Syria, she said — and Russia has already faced greater consequences.</p> <p>The surprise of some Western observers about Russia’s willingness to attack Ukrainian cities has frustrated many Syrians.</p> <p>“We as Syrians are really saddened to see the same atrocities that we have been suffering from, and we have been calling for the world to stop, are now repeated,” Habib, of the White Helmets, said. “And we see that as a direct result for the lack of accountability for what happened previously in Crimea and in Syria.”</p> <p>Syrians who survived Russian bombardment have offered Ukrainians practical tips: Don’t respond to bombing scenes until you’re sure a second bomb isn’t coming, and stock up on food.</p> <p>The White Helmets, meanwhile, are sharing lessons learned from Syria with Ukrainian partners and translating into Ukrainian its safety guidebook for civilians under attack, Habib said.</p> <p>“I don’t see this ending soon, so they need to be prepared for a long-term war,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Myanmar political prisoners top 10,000
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/asia/myanmar-coup-prisoners.html
GIST	<p>The military junta that seized power in Myanmar 14 months ago is now detaining 10,000 political prisoners, a rights organization that monitors detentions said on Thursday. Many of the prisoners have been tortured and are being held in deplorable conditions, according to the group.</p> <p>The regime’s crackdown has been so harsh that more political prisoners are now being held in Myanmar than were imprisoned in total throughout the half century of military rule that ended in 2010, said U Aung Myo Kyaw, a spokesman for the rights group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners.</p> <p>“We have the largest number of political prisoners in Myanmar’s history in barely a year,” he said.</p> <p>Myanmar reached the grim milestone of 10,000 political prisoners held at a single time as the regime continues to imprison suspected opponents at a rate of about 20 people a day, according to A.A.P.P., which has closely tracked arrests since the coup on Feb. 1 last year.</p> <p>That figure does not include the more than 3,000 political prisoners who were arrested and released, often after enduring brutal interrogations and many months in prison. Nearly 2,000 more opponents of the regime are evading arrest warrants, including many who have fled to the jungle to join an armed resistance against the junta.</p> <p>While celebrating Armed Forces Day on Sunday, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the coup, called opponents of the regime “terrorists” and vowed to “annihilate them to an end.” On the same holiday honoring the military a year ago, the security forces killed at least 114 protesters during its deadliest day since taking power.</p> <p>Not long ago, Western countries had high hopes for democracy in Myanmar.</p> <p>The military, which first seized power in 1962, began relaxing its grip more than a decade ago, allowing for democratic elections, the proliferation of cellphones and the embrace of social media.</p> <p>The longtime democracy advocate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who had endured 15 years under house arrest, led her National League for Democracy party to a landslide election victory in 2015 and formed a civilian government in a power-sharing arrangement with the generals.</p>

But after her party won a second landslide vote in 2020, the military seized full control, imprisoning Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint, and at least 640 other officials and party leaders, according to the National League for Democracy.

After nationwide protests erupted, the security forces responded by shooting some protesters, arresting others and raiding the homes of suspected critics. The A.A.P.P. says at least 1,723 civilians have been killed.

President Biden and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong issued a joint statement in Washington on Tuesday calling on the Myanmar junta to release political prisoners, allow humanitarian access and begin restoring democracy.

“The United States and Singapore share deep concerns about the situation in Myanmar and the challenges it poses to regional stability,” the two leaders said. “We continue to call for an end to violence against civilians in Myanmar, the release of all political detainees, including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and foreign detainees.”

Antony J. Blinken, the United States secretary of state, estimated in December that more than a million political prisoners are being held in more than 65 countries around the world.

“More individuals are being unjustly detained or convicted in sham trials with each passing day,” he said, citing the case of Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was sentenced to six years in prison in December and January and faces a dozen more counts. Mr. Blinken urged countries detaining political prisoners to free them.

While numbers are difficult to come by, North Korea probably holds the most political prisoners of any nation, with estimates of 120,000 or more. Many are imprisoned in a vast network of forced labor camps that has been expanded under its brutal ruler, Kim Jong-un. In Egypt, where the armed forces commander, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, seized power in 2013, human rights groups say the regime holds as many as 60,000 political prisoners.

In Southeast Asia, Myanmar has quickly outstripped the dismal records of its autocratic neighbors, including Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, said Phil Robertson, the deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

“Quite clearly, the number of people in detention in Myanmar is off the charts compared to anywhere else in the region,” he said. “There is no doubt that Myanmar has the worst human rights situation in Southeast Asia.”

Throughout the previous period of military rule in Myanmar from 1962 to 2010, A.A.P.P. estimates that the entire number of political prisoners totaled less than 10,000, and possibly as few as 7,000.

The current regime, in addition to targeting elected officials and party leaders, has gone after journalists, doctors, human rights activists, teachers and celebrities.

Of those imprisoned since the coup, the rights group said, 890 have been convicted and sentenced, often to many years in prison. Of these, 52 have been sentenced to death, including U Phyo Zayar Thaw, a famous hip-hop artist and a member of Parliament, who was arrested in November with a stash of weapons and accused of leading attacks against the regime.

More than 9,100 prisoners are awaiting trial, many of them for more than a year. Sean Turnell, an Australian who was Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi’s economic adviser, is now being tried with her on a charge of violating the colonial-era Official Secrets Act, which carries a sentence of up to 14 years.

	<p>The 10,000 figure does not include at least 103 others who have died in custody, many of them from torture during interrogation, A.A.P.P. said. For those who reach court, the trials are usually brief, with little opportunity to mount a defense.</p> <p>U Khin Maung Myint, a former prison guard who became a lawyer and now represents defendants detained for opposing the coup, said the system guarantees their incarceration. Some of the accused are tried by military tribunals, where attorneys are barred from attending and defendants receive the maximum sentence, he said.</p> <p>In civilian courts, defense attorneys are allowed to be present, but they are rarely allowed to cross-examine witnesses. All trials are closed to the public, the hearings are brief and everyone who goes on trial is found guilty, he said.</p> <p>“No one has been acquitted at all,” Mr. Khin Maung Myint said. “As more and more people are arrested and convicted, there are more political prisoners in prisons than ever before.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 EPA no action perchlorate in drinking water
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/climate/epa-perchlorate-drinking-water.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Biden administration on Thursday said it would uphold a Trump-era decision and not impose limits in drinking water of perchlorate, a contaminant that has been linked to brain damage in infants.</p> <p>The announcement from the Environmental Protection Agency shocked public health advocates who had denounced the Trump administration in 2020 for opting not to regulate perchlorate. The chemical is a component in rocket fuel, ammunition and explosives. Exposure can damage the development of fetuses and children and cause a measurable decrease in I.Q. in newborns.</p> <p>The Trump administration had found that perchlorate did not meet the criteria for regulation because it did not appear in drinking water “with a frequency and at levels of public health concern.” Activists at the time accused the E.P.A. of disregarding science.</p> <p>After President Biden took office, the agency launched a review of the decision and on Thursday endorsed it, saying it was “supported by the best available peer-reviewed science.”</p> <p>The E.P.A. said it would take other action, like setting up new monitoring tools and doing more to clean up contaminated sites, “to ensure that public health is protected from perchlorate in drinking water.”</p> <p>In a statement, the agency said it will “continue to consider new information on the health effects and occurrence of perchlorate.” The E.P.A. said its decision does not affect any state standards for the chemical. California and Massachusetts, for example, have set their own limits for perchlorate in drinking water.</p> <p>Erik D. Olson, the senior strategic director for health at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an advocacy group, said those measures aren’t enough.</p> <p>“We are extremely disappointed and think that it’s unscientific and unlawful to not regulate this contaminant that’s in millions of people’s drinking water,” he said. “They’re not following the best science.”</p> <p>Perchlorate can occur naturally, but high concentrations have been found in at least 26 states, often near military installations where it has been used as an additive in rocket fuel, making propellants more reliable. Research has shown that by interfering with the thyroid gland’s iodine uptake, perchlorate can stunt the production of hormones essential to the development of fetuses, infants and children.</p>

	<p>Bill Romanelli, a spokesman for the Perchlorate Information Bureau, a coalition funded by aerospace contractors including Aerojet Rocketdyne, American Pacific Corporation and Lockheed Martin, applauded the Biden administration.</p> <p>“Today’s decision by E.P.A. that perchlorate does not merit additional federal regulation is based on the best available scientific information, ensures protection of public health and the environment, and assures access to clean water,” Mr. Romanelli wrote in a statement.</p> <p>He called perchlorate “one of the most well-studied environmental chemicals E.P.A. has ever evaluated.” He said peer-reviewed studies have found that the chemical does not occur with a frequency and at a level in public water systems to cause concern.</p> <p>The battle over perchlorate dates back to the early 2000s, when the administration of President George W. Bush decided not to regulate it.</p> <p>The Obama administration reversed that decision, issuing a finding in 2011 that perchlorate in drinking water posed a serious health risk for as many as 16 million people in the United States. It issued a recommendation to states that 15 micrograms per liter is the highest concentration of perchlorate in water that the most sensitive populations, like pregnant women, should ingest.</p> <p>But the Defense Department and military contractors such as Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman waged aggressive efforts to block the controls, and the fight dragged on.</p> <p>The Trump administration in 2020 reversed the Obama decision and additionally overturned the health finding, saying it was “not in the public interest” to regulate the contaminant.</p> <p>Environmental groups sued the E.P.A. over the decision not to regulate, but suspended their lawsuit after President Biden was inaugurated in 2021.</p> <p>The American Academy of Pediatrics, which had told the agency that perchlorate can cause a significant drop in the I.Q. of newborns and urged the “strongest possible” limits on the contaminant, declined to comment on Thursday.</p> <p>Mr. Olson said the litigation against the E.P.A. will now restart with the goal of compelling the agency to impose standards for perchlorate.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 More mixed signals from Russia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/ukraine-russia-war.html
GIST	<p>KRAKOW, Poland — Facing deeper isolation by the day over the Ukraine war, Russia seemed to slightly recalibrate its stance Thursday, allowing greater humanitarian access to the devastated port city of Mariupol and apparently retreating from a payment confrontation with European gas customers.</p> <p>But Western officials said they saw little evidence to support Russia’s claims that it was greatly reducing its military presence around Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, and fighting continued unabated in areas around the city on Thursday. In Dnipro, the central city that has become a hub for humanitarian aid to other parts of Ukraine, a Russian attack overnight destroyed an oil terminal, a local official said.</p> <p>“Russia maintains pressure on Kyiv and other cities, so we can expect additional offensive actions, bringing even more suffering,” the NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said at a news conference.</p> <p>Whatever Moscow’s real intentions on the battlefield, Russian officials scoffed Thursday at American claims a day earlier that subordinates of President Vladimir V. Putin, fearing his wrath, were misleading him about how the war was going.</p>

“They do not understand President Putin,” said the Kremlin spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov. “They do not understand the decision-making mechanism and they do not understand the efforts of our work.”

In Mariupol, where the population has, for weeks, been cut off from the outside world by heavy Russian bombardment and intense fighting, a respite appeared possible amid reports that a team from the International Committee of the Red Cross was preparing to try to enter the city. The group hoped to deliver emergency humanitarian aid and begin evacuating residents on Friday.

“There seems to be a glimmer of hope we might be able to go, so we need to be close,” said Crystal Wells, a spokeswoman for the Red Cross in Geneva.

Thousands of civilians are believed to have died, and survivors have been trapped in basements without heat or electricity, and desperately short of food, water and other essentials.

Ukraine’s deputy prime minister, Iryna Vereshchuk, said Thursday that a convoy of 45 buses had departed for Mariupol to reach trapped civilians, and that an agreement had been reached on a passageway for evacuating people from the city of Melitopol, farther west.

People from both cities were expected to make their way to Zaporizhzhia, a city farther north that remains under Ukrainian control, although evacuations in previous days have been sporadic and have often been scrapped at the last minute because of fighting.

The Russians also appeared to show some leeway on Mr. Putin’s demand that European customers of his country’s natural gas now pay in rubles, or risk a cutoff. European governments, which rely heavily on Russian gas imports, had rejected this new condition, arguing that it violated purchase contracts.

After speaking with the Russian leader, the prime minister of Italy, Mario Draghi, said he did not believe that Europe was “in danger” of having its gas supply halted. He said that he understood that the Russian president would grant a “concession” to European countries, and that the conversion of payments from dollars or euros into rubles was “an internal matter of the Russian Federation.”

Russia also said Thursday that its forces were leaving the defunct Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, according to a statement from Ukraine’s state-run energy company. Chernobyl, site of the worst nuclear accident in history, had been occupied by Russian forces since the war’s early days.

Asked about unconfirmed reports that some Russian soldiers had suffered radiation sickness, the Pentagon press secretary, John F. Kirby, said the troop movement appeared to be part of a broader repositioning and not from “health hazards or some sort of emergency or a crisis at Chernobyl.”

Both Ukrainian and Russian officials signaled a willingness to keep negotiating over how to end the war, now in its sixth week. A member of Ukraine’s negotiating team said that discussions would resume via video link on Friday, and the foreign minister of Turkey, which hosted talks this week, said that his Russian and Ukrainian counterparts could meet within weeks.

And on Thursday, Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, offered cautious backing to a proposal circulating in European corridors of power that might help bring about a peace agreement. In principle, Mr. Erdogan said, Turkey could help guarantee Ukraine’s security.

During peace talks earlier this week in Istanbul, Ukrainian officials said their country was ready to concede a key demand from Moscow and declare itself permanently neutral, forsaking hopes of joining NATO. Ukrainian negotiators also said they were willing to discuss Russian territorial claims.

But the Ukrainians said they would make the concessions only in return for security guarantees from a group of other nations.

Ukrainian officials envision an arrangement in which a group of countries — potentially including NATO members like the United States, Britain, Turkey, France and Germany — would commit to defending Ukraine.

On Thursday, a Ukrainian negotiator, Mykhailo Podolyak, suggested to a Turkish broadcaster that the so-called guarantor countries would have legal obligations to provide weapons, military personnel or financial help if conflict involving Ukraine erupted again.

“This is the meaning of this pact: A country that considers an attack will know that Ukraine is not alone,” he said.

The big question was whether Moscow, which has repeatedly objected to what it calls NATO encroachment, finds this palatable.

Despite Russian claims that the war was proceeding according to plan, the Kremlin is said to be struggling with problems in its military, which has made far less headway in Ukraine than Western experts had once expected.

On Thursday, the director of Britain’s electronic surveillance agency, Jeremy Fleming, said the Russian forces, hampered by low morale and weapons shortages, had accidentally shot down their own aircraft and had refused to carry out orders.

But in Russia itself, Mr. Putin’s approval ratings have reached levels unseen in years, according to a Russian poll released on Thursday, as many Russians rally around the flag in the face of sanctions and other international pressure.

Although the credibility of the poll might be questionable — especially since Mr. Putin has severely limited free expression since the war — it was conducted by the Levada Center, one of the few independent pollster groups left in Russia.

“The confrontation with the West has consolidated people,” said Denis Volkov, the center’s director.

While they generally did not support Mr. Putin, some respondents said that now was the time to do so.

People believe that “everyone is against us” and that “Putin defends us; otherwise, we would be eaten alive,” Mr. Volkov said.

The war’s destructive ripple effects have spilled over into marketplaces around the world.

Both Ukraine and Russia are major providers of the world’s wheat, corn and barley, but Ukrainian agricultural officials said Thursday that more than 16 million tons of grain had been stranded in the country, and that Ukraine had missed out on at least \$1.5 billion in exports. Earlier in the week, the U.S. State Department’s No. 2 official warned at a U.N. Security Council meeting that the war posed “immediate and dangerous implications for global food security.”

With fuel costs soaring over sanctions on Russian oil, the U.S. government announced a plan to release up to 180 million barrels from strategic reserves over the next six months to enlarge the supply and ease prices.

Still, the Biden administration made clear that it would expand the sanctions on Russia as part of the American-led effort to cripple the Russian economy as punishment for the Ukraine invasion.

In Washington, the Treasury Department on Thursday leveled new sanctions on Russian technology companies and what it called illicit procurement networks that Russia is using to evade existing sanctions.

	“We will continue to target Putin’s war machine with sanctions from every angle until this senseless war of choice is over,” the Treasury secretary, Janet L. Yellen, said in a statement.
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HEADLINE	03/31 Not just one but two Covid problems
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/briefing/covid-funding-boosters-vaccinations.html
GIST	<p>The short-term and long-term flaws with the country’s current Covid-19 policy are quite different.</p> <p>In the short term, the main problem is a lack of demand for Covid vaccines and treatments: Not enough people are trying to get them. In the longer term — by the second half of this year — the bigger problem may end up being a lack of supply, especially if cases surge again.</p> <p>I think this distinction has gotten lost in some of the public discussion. Yesterday, President Biden called for additional Covid funding, after Congress had left out such money from its most recent spending bill because of a disagreement over how to pay for it.</p> <p>“We need to secure additional supply now,” Biden said in a brief speech, shortly before receiving his second booster shot onstage. “We can’t wait until we find ourselves in the midst of another surge to act. It’ll be too late.”</p> <p>Biden is right that the lack of funding creates problems. To ensure an adequate supply of vaccines and treatments later this year, the government probably needs to take action soon. Democrats and Republicans have been negotiating over a possible deal this week.</p> <p>But the potential funding shortfall is nowhere near the entire problem. A lack of money is not preventing many Americans from getting vaccinated or getting valuable treatments right now. Even if Congress does pass more Covid funding, the country will still face a problem that is more about information and persuasion than dollars.</p> <p>Shots in arms</p> <p>For months, the United States has been awash in Covid vaccine shots, and many Americans would benefit from getting one. About one-quarter of adults remain unvaccinated, while roughly another quarter are vaccinated but not boosted, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. A booster shot sharply reduces the chances of severe Covid illness, especially for vulnerable people like the elderly and immunocompromised.</p> <p>I know that last point may sound counterintuitive. The elderly and immunocompromised, even if boosted, face a <i>higher</i> risk of severe illness than a healthy, younger person. But a booster shot still reduces the risk <i>more</i> for a vulnerable person than for an average person. It’s a common dynamic in medicine: Treatments tend to be most valuable for the most vulnerable even if they do not eliminate risk.</p> <p>Despite the huge value of additional vaccine shots, many Americans simply aren’t getting one. The number of shots given per day, including both initial doses and boosters, has fallen to the lowest level since the beginning of the mass vaccination campaign, in early 2021.</p> <p>What might help?</p> <p>Employer and customer mandates would probably nudge more people to get initial shots. Previous employer mandates have generally caused more people to get vaccinated and only a tiny share to quit or be fired. But mandates have fallen out of fashion. Even some politically liberal places, like New York City and Washington, D.C., have been dropping theirs recently.</p> <p>Boosting more people seems as if it should be more feasible, because it involves people who have already received a shot. Still, boosters are lagging. Many Americans seem confused about how much a booster shot matters.</p>

The scientific evidence suggests that everybody who is eligible should get a first booster shot. A second booster shot — now available to people 50 and older, among others — may also make sense, although the benefits appear smaller. And if you are boosted and have already had Omicron, you probably don't need another booster yet, Dr. Eric Topol of Scripps Research notes (as part of [his helpful overview of the evidence](#)).

Treatments

The story is similar with both Evusheld (a drug that appears to boost immunity among the immunocompromised) and post-infection treatments that reduce the chance of severe illness. They are widely available, yet many people remain unaware of them.

[Many doctors also seem uncertain](#) how and when to prescribe them. “Doctors are beginning to use this,” a Biden administration official told me, “but it takes a while for things to get absorbed in medical practice.”

Biden yesterday announced a new federal website — [Covid.gov](#) — where people can search for pharmacies near them that have both Evusheld and the treatments. I found most parts of it simple to use. But I also thought that Rob Relyea, a Microsoft engineer who has become an advocate for the immunocompromised, made a good critique on Twitter: The Evusheld information is too hard to find.

The bottom line is that Americans would benefit from hearing a series of clear, repeated messages:

- Getting a booster shot may save your life.
- Many immunocompromised people would probably be helped by Evusheld, and it's available.
- Vulnerable people — like the elderly — should talk with a doctor as soon as they test positive for Covid and seek treatments that can reduce its severity, like Paxlovid or molnupiravir.

As Biden said yesterday, “America has the tools to protect people.”

What's next

If more people become aware of the treatments, however, some of them are likely to run low later this year. And if the federal government waits until then to act, it may discover that other countries have bought the available supply. “You can't snap your fingers and buy the stuff,” the Biden administration official told me.

Already, the administration has reduced shipments of one kind of treatment — monoclonal antibodies — that it is sending to states. It has also said it would cut back on new orders of Evusheld in the next several days.

A Covid bill would likely cost \$10 billion to \$15 billion, or less than 0.25 percent of the annual federal budget. Congressional Republicans have said that the money should be diverted from another area, rather than add to the deficit. My colleague Sheryl Gay Stolberg, who covers the pandemic from Washington, said Congress was likely to agree on a funding source soon, perhaps before lawmakers leave for their April recess. But nobody knows for sure.

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HEADLINE	03/31 'China model' put to the test
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/business/china-covid-economy-russia.html
GIST	A year ago, while many countries were still reeling from Covid-19, China seemed to be one of few places prospering through the pandemic. It was also the only major economy that reported growth in 2020. Global investors were bullish on Chinese stocks even as Beijing's regulatory crackdown on its private sector became more like a political campaign.

That led some people in China to argue that its one-party authoritarian rule offered a compelling alternative to traditional liberal democracy. The United States was declining politically and economically, they said, and the world was “gravitating toward China.” Many Chinese cheered the narrative online.

A year later, the tone within China is more one of anxiety, anger and despair. In the past month, hundreds of millions of people there have struggled under lockdowns as coronavirus outbreaks spread across the country. Foreign investors are dumping Chinese stocks over geopolitical, regulatory and pandemic uncertainties. And the government’s support of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia as he wages war in Ukraine has risked the world’s criticism, and potentially sanctions.

It’s all leading to increasingly anxious questions about the country’s path — and even about whether too much power has been concentrated in the hands of the country’s leader, Xi Jinping, who is seeking a third five-year term at the Communist Party congress late in the year.

On social media, a growing number of citizens are accusing the Communist Party of breaching its social contract with the people. They had tolerated, and sometimes praised, one-party rule in exchange for economic growth and social stability. But its stringent lockdown measures, which are straining entire cities, and its regulatory crackdowns are costing many of them jobs and income and leaving their futures looking much more uncertain and gloomier than a few years ago.

After one official newspaper, Guangming Daily, published a commentary about the government’s persistence in pursuing its “zero-Covid” policy, which has led to harsh and unpredictable lockdowns, users on the social media platform Weibo posted nearly 10,000 comments, with the vast majority urging the government to end the strategy. “Please read these comments. Please look at the lives of ordinary people,” wrote a user called Diquiren1990. All the comments disappeared the next day after the commenting function was disabled.

After the Chinese ambassador to the United States wrote an opinion piece for The Washington Post about China’s position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, tens of thousands of social media users on WeChat rushed to post comments on a Chinese translation. The vast majority of those posts criticized China’s position, which is pro-Russia under a veneer of neutrality. “There’s no neutrality in the struggle between justice and evil,” one comment said. “Straddling between two boats will only end up in falling in the water.” All of those comments ended up censored, too.

And a viral video with the headline “The demise of China’s glory and dream” lamented the disastrous impact of the government’s crackdowns on the private sector. It was liked by many of the country’s top investors, scholars and entrepreneurs, including a co-founder of Tencent, China’s biggest internet company, who had left the company. The video has been deleted.

In private, some academics and businesspeople are discussing growing concerns about Mr. Xi’s focus on rivaling the United States and proving the viability of the Chinese political model — a focus that some worry has become an obsession.

The competition between countries, Mr. Xi has said, is ultimately competition between political systems. The handling of the pandemic “made it evident which country’s leadership and political system is superior,” he told top cadres in January 2021. “Time and momentum are on our side.”

Chinese citizens have to be extremely careful in criticizing Mr. Xi, some of whose critics have been sentenced to as much as 18 years in prison. So some are resorting to quoting former top leaders to express their frustration that Mr. Xi has stepped away from the proven path of reform and opening that provided the country with decades of prosperity.

Some quoted the country’s former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping as saying the two countries that had benefited the most from invading China were Japan and imperial Russia, and to a certain extent the Soviet Union — a roundabout way to say China should distance itself from Russia.

They shared images of former President Jiang Zemin sharing a dance with Bernadette Chirac, the wife of France's former president Jacques Chirac, in 1999. Those were the days when China was more popular in the world.

They quoted former President Hu Jintao's famous instruction that China should "avoid self-inflicted setbacks," which one Chinese diplomat interpreted as avoiding political campaigns like the Cultural Revolution that threw the country into chaos and destitution. Quoting that in the current context amounts to a not-so-indirect criticism of Mr. Xi's ruling style.

They even used the Soviet Union as an example to prove the peril of dictatorship. A modern nation "should have the system to prevent one person from taking the whole nation over the precipice," according to one article posted on WeChat, the social media platform.

The public's pent-up anger is not likely to be enough to sway Beijing's decision-making or to threaten the rule of the Communist Party, which is accustomed to keeping people in line by using indoctrination and intimidation. But it marks a departure from the heavy silence that has prevailed under Mr. Xi's rule.

Two years ago, China celebrated the merits of its top-down ruling approach by pointing to its success in building a new hospital in just 10 days in Wuhan and containing the spread of the coronavirus in three months. Today, many people view the makeshift quarantine centers as a symbol of Beijing's stubborn insistence on a costly coronavirus policy that seems to mainly serve the purpose of proving the superiority of its system.

The country's unforgiving pandemic control measures are being called the "white terror," a nod to the vast army of neighborhood workers who wear white hazmat suits. People have shared videos and photos of protests in which demonstrators chanted, "We need to work!" and "We need to eat!"

Some commenters said that Beijing had wasted its early success in pandemic control because it believed that its political will alone would suffice to beat the virus. They questioned why the government hadn't spent the huge resources it deployed in mass testing and quarantines on a vaccination drive, especially among older people. They asked whether Beijing was irresponsible in not approving the more effective Western vaccines for the sake of national pride.

Many accused the government of failing to see the huge sacrifices that businesses and individuals had to make, or complained that people were struggling to get by and falling behind on mortgages and other personal loans. They were angry that some people had died of heart attacks, asthma, cancer and other diseases because hospitals turned them away under Covid restriction guidelines.

"As long as you don't die of Covid, you can die of any cause," goes a viral online quip.

Beijing remains unwavering in the face of public resentment.

"In the past two years, China has fully demonstrated the significant advantage in its political system and its strong national capacity in containing the pandemic," read a commentary in the state-run People's Daily newspaper on Monday. The zero-Covid policy is a "line of defense that a nation of 1.4 billion people will have to hold," it said.

Beijing also seemed to have dug in its heels on supporting Russia by running a series of official commentaries that blamed U.S. hegemony for the war in Ukraine. On Tuesday, a commentary in the People's Daily called the United States "the initiator" of the war, which it called a "crisis." On Wednesday, another commentary on the same page said the United States was "adding oil to flames" by providing military assistance to Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia.

That's troubling for many people who are worried that Beijing's pro-Moscow stance could accelerate China's decoupling from the West, or even lead to Russia-like sanctions that would have huge implications in technology, trade and capital markets.

“Is it good or bad if China is cast on the same side of the Iron Curtain as Russia?” the nationalistic writer Wang Xiaodong asked his followers on Weibo. His conclusion: China should try its best to avoid the scenario because it would have to pay an extremely high price.

The only policy area that Beijing has relented on somewhat has been its regulatory crackdowns on the private sector. After a heavy sell-off of Chinese stocks in mid-March, China’s economic czar, Liu He, urged government agencies to roll out market-friendly policies and to show caution in introducing any measures that risked hurting the markets.

But China’s political-campaign-style regulatory crackdown has done its damage. Mass job cutting, once rare in China, is happening in tech, real estate, education and online games, some of the industries that were hit the hardest by the crackdowns. Posts about unemployment are shared widely as a gloomy sentiment grips the educated middle class.

“Standing at this historic turning point, we look back to the Golden Age,” read an online post about China’s four decades of economic transformation and dreams of individual prosperity. “We all thought it would be our future,” it said. “It turned out to be an illusory dream.”

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HEADLINE	03/31 How bad is California drought?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/us/california-rain-drought.html
GIST	<p>Today marks the final day of California’s rainy season.</p> <p>December, January and February are typically the wettest months in the Golden State, with 75 percent of the state’s annual precipitation falling between November and March.</p> <p>Now we’re about to enter our dry season, and the drought is nowhere near over. Gov. Gavin Newsom this week, in an attempt to curb water usage, proposed banning businesses from watering their lawns. More than 93 percent of California is considered to be in severe or extreme drought.</p> <p>“We are definitely very much at the tail end of our wet season in California,” Jeanine Jones, drought manager with the California Department of Water Resources, told me. “We are not expecting any significant amount of additional precipitation — certainly not something that would make any difference for the drought.”</p> <p>Jones added: “In other words, most of what we’re going to get, we have gotten.”</p> <p>So where does that leave us?</p> <p>All of California’s major reservoirs are currently at below-average levels. The state’s snowpack on Wednesday was a dismal 39 percent of what it typically is this time of year, according to state data. Newsom hasn’t yet announced mandatory water cuts for Californians but faces increasing pressure to do so.</p> <p>The water year in California runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30 and is defined that way so that the winter rainy season falls within a single water year.</p> <p>Between October and December — the start of this water year — California received more rainfall than it had over the previous 12 months. Atmospheric rivers shattered records and replenished reservoirs.</p> <p>But then we entered 2022. January and February represented the driest two-month start to a year on record in California, according to state officials. March is unlikely to be much better, even after this week’s storms.</p>

	<p>The whiplash isn't unusual in the Golden State; we have more climate variability than any other state in the nation, Jones said. And the weather has recently become even more unpredictable because of the effects of climate change.</p> <p>Still, the heavy rains from the end of 2021 were not enough to overcome the past three exceptionally dry months.</p> <p>At the end of December, the state had received 150 percent of the precipitation it typically has at that point in the water year. That figure has since dropped to below average — to roughly 70 percent.</p> <p>Unfortunately, with March coming to a close and no storms on the horizon, we can say with near certainty that California's drought in 2022 will keep getting worse.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Audit: Postal iCOP exceeded authority
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/31/inspector-general-postal-inspectors-spying-overste/
GIST	<p>Postal inspectors' covert surveillance program conducted unauthorized searches and exceeded its law enforcement authority, according to a new audit from the United States Postal Service's watchdog.</p> <p>The USPS Inspector General found more than a quarter of analysts' work on a covert program over two-plus years may not have had legal authorization.</p> <p>The inspector general dug into the postal inspectors' Internet Covert Operations Program (iCOP) at the request of the House Oversight and Reform Committee, which urged the watchdog last year to review accusations that the postal service surveilled Americans' social media accounts through iCOP.</p> <p>"We determined that certain proactive searches iCOP conducted using an open-source intelligence tool from February to April 2021 exceeded the Postal Inspection Service's law enforcement authority," said the audit dated March 25.</p> <p>"Furthermore, we could not corroborate whether other work analysts completed from October 2018 through June 2021 was legally authorized," the auditors wrote.</p> <p>In particular, the inspector general audit said it "could not corroborate whether 28 percent of the work" conducted by analysts from October 2018 through June 2021 had legal authorization.</p> <p>The iCOP work was renamed the Analytics Team in April 2021, amid mounting scrutiny from lawmakers and privacy advocates. Analysts working on covert surveillance conducted unauthorized searches using an intelligence tool, the identity of which is redacted in the inspector general audit.</p> <p>"From February 19 to April 21, 2021, iCOP used one of the 10 profiles established in the [redacted] intelligence tool to conduct searches that were not legally authorized," the audit said. "This tool manages proactive intelligence gathering by constantly monitoring open-source websites, including social media and message platforms, for predefined sets of keywords."</p> <p>Analysts' work needs a postal component to get authorization but the audit found the keywords used by one of the profiles did not mention the mail, postal crimes, or postal facilities and personnel. Instead, keywords included terms such as "protest," "attack," and "destroy."</p> <p>The inspector general audit said the problems happened because the postal inspectors' management did not involve its legal team in developing its covert surveillance program and procedures.</p> <p>The management disagreed that its analysts' searches were not legally authorized.</p>

“Management did not agree that certain proactive intelligence searches that iCOP conducted exceeded the Postal Inspection Service’s law enforcement authority,” the audit said. “Specifically, while they agreed that Postal Inspection Service activities need a postal nexus, they did not agree that the agency is required to limit searches to terms that have a postal nexus. Instead, they stated the focus should be on whether the purpose of the search itself has a postal nexus.”

The United States Postal Inspection Service did not immediately comment on Thursday regarding the audit and its findings.

The inspection service said it was working on a response to the audit.

Accusations that postal inspectors snooped on Americans’ social media accounts emerged last year following Yahoo! News’ publication of a bulletin revealing iCOP analysts examining “right-wing Parler and Telegram accounts” ahead of planned protests.

The bulletin also indicated iCOP analysts utilized Facebook and Twitter.

The inspector general’s audit said more than 15 iCOP reports produced from September 2020 to April 2021 focused on protest activities and had no postal nexus.

Fewer than five iCOP reports were categorized as “election-related” and at least one election-related report had no postal nexus.

The audit said postal inspectors’ management agreed to conduct a full review of the Analytics Team’s responsibilities, actions, and procedures to develop a process to ensure its work is authorized and intends to implement those changes by Sept. 30.

The management also agreed to run its keywords used in searches by its legal team and update its standard operating procedures accordingly by April 29, according to the audit.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Russia woos Southeast Asia
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/31/russia-woos-southeast-asia-search-allies-markets-a/
GIST	<p>BANGKOK, Thailand — Russia is trying to earn some major goodwill in Southeast Asia by offering weapons, investment, tourism and diplomatic support to Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, to buffer the Kremlin’s losses elsewhere caused by U.S. and allied sanctions against its invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>While the Biden administration and major U.S. allies in Europe and East Asia have condemned Russia’s military move against Ukraine, the charm offensive here underscores that fact that a number of major players around the globe are still on the fence over how to respond and whether to sign on to punishing economic and financial sanctions the U.S. and European Union have imposed.</p> <p>One of the most complex displays of the Kremlin’s maneuvering to keep friends and influence people is unfolding here in Thailand, a non-NATO U.S. treaty ally and long a bulwark of American influence in the region. Russia’s top diplomat has praised Bangkok for its stand to date.</p> <p>“We appreciate the balanced position of the Royal Thai government,” Russian Ambassador Evgeny Tomikhin told reporters on March 15. “We have no political dispute.”</p> <p>On Feb. 28, Thailand declined an unusually pointed, public demand by 25 Bangkok-based European ambassadors appealing to the government to condemn the invasion.</p> <p>“We need to keep a balance,” Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha told reporters, explaining why he rejected their demand.</p> <p>Coincidentally or not, on the same day Thai government officials on Phuket island, the country’s international tourist playground, hosted a visit by Ambassador Tomikhin.</p>

The Russian delegation reportedly suggested upgrading links between luxurious, beach-blessed Phuket and Russia's relatively prosperous northeast Kamchatka peninsula to benefit both countries.

Thailand is being especially gracious to Russia because in July the two countries expect to celebrate the 125th anniversary of diplomatic relations. That link is esteemed among Thailand's ruling right-wing royalists and others because it began with intimate personal ties between the then-Siamese and Russian royal families during Tsar Alexander III's reign.

In 1891, three years before becoming the next tsar, Nicholas II traveled through Bangkok and met Siam's King Chulalongkorn.

In 1897, King Chulalongkorn visited the newly enthroned tsar in St. Petersburg and they established diplomatic relations.

"The king's close personal ties with the Royal House of Russia, where he sent one of his sons, Prince Chakrabongse, to study for eight years [including at a military school] directly helped Siam vis-a-vis French and British colonialist ambitions," the Royal Thai Embassy in Warsaw, Poland, said on its website.

While there, the prince married a Russian woman.

Russia initially provided diplomatic support bolstering Thailand against 19th century French and British colonialists before Siam renamed itself Thailand. But Nicholas II appeared to side with France after 1902, causing relations to wane.

Before the COVID pandemic, Thailand attracted thousands of Russian tourists. Luring them back is part of Thailand's economic plan to resurrect its devastated international tourism industry, and officials report that 23,000 Russians — a fifth of the total international traffic — visiting Thailand in January.

Russians currently in Thailand, or hoping to arrive, cannot pay hotel and other travel bills or business investments via the SWIFT international banking system because of U.S. sanctions. But they can enjoy China's UnionPay transfers which are used in Thailand, Russia and elsewhere.

Some Thai banks customarily issue UnionPay debit cards to Thai and foreign clients, alongside Visa and MasterCard.

Russia and Thailand are not major trading partners, though Russia exports steel, scrap metal, fertilizers, minerals, synthetic rubber, diamonds, and paper to Thailand, while Thailand sends Russia sugar, rice, gems, clothes, canned food and furniture.

Ian Storey, a senior fellow at the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, a think tank, said Thailand, like many countries in the region, finds itself balancing traditional ties to the U.S. with the emerging economic, military and diplomatic might of China. For Bangkok, the resulting "bamboo diplomacy," coupled with the need to put a priority on domestic problems, translates into a deep reluctance to alienate anyone in the emerging divisions between major powers anywhere in the world.

"In the main, ... Thailand tries not to take sides in the geopolitical squabbles among the great powers. Hence the Thai government's assertion of neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine War," Mr. Storey wrote in an analysis last week for the institute's journal *Fulcrum*, which focuses on Southeast Asian issues.

Thailand's "rather passive approach to international affairs is also a product of its domestic politics, which have been roiled by a series of political crises, some violent, in the wake of the country's two military coups," he wrote. "These crises have taken up much of the establishment's policy bandwidth, leaving little space for foreign affairs."

Other opportunities

Russia is seeking other diplomatic opportunities in the region, particularly with nations already at odds with the U.S. and the West. Neighboring Myanmar's coup-installed military regime perceives Russia's war as "the right thing to do for Russia to consolidate its sovereignty," junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said.

The Kremlin was "showing the world that it stands as a powerful nation in the global balance of world peace," he told the U.S.-backed Voice of America's (VOA) Burmese News.

The junta's No. 2 commander, Soe Win, recently visited Russia reportedly to sign military contracts worth \$2.3 billion, including the new air defense system, the VOA report said.

"In late January of this year, a Russian vessel was pictured unloading a consignment of BRDM-2M 4X4 armored vehicles, and shipping containers full of other [military] toys-for-the-boys, at Yangon's Thilawa port," it reported.

During the past 10 years, Myanmar's purchases from Russia include MiG-29 jet fighters, Pantsir-S1 anti-aircraft missile and gun systems, artillery, helicopters, radar, and Orlan-10E surveillance drones.

Myanmar's junta, which seized power in a February 2021 coup, is desperate for Russian support. Much of the international community shuns the junta because of the military's assaults against pro-democracy activists and others.

"Russian arms deals have continued since Myanmar's coup," wrote Edith Mirante, a pro-democracy activist and author of two books about Myanmar. Myanmar has also purchased weapons from Ukraine and Belarus.

Some analysts suspect Russia may be trying to gain access to a port along Myanmar's warm southern coast on the Bay of Bengal. Access to the port, which widens into the Indian Ocean, would complicate the "Indo-Pacific" military strategy both the Trump and Biden administrations have pursued as a way to contain China.

In June 2021, newly empowered coup Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing visited Russia — his seventh trip — and noted, "A lot of our citizens have been sent to Russia for their studies. When it comes to cooperation, the military technological sector cooperation is the deepest," the general said.

Myanmar has used Russian helicopters and artillery against minority ethnic Karen, Kachin, and other guerrillas fighting for autonomy or independence in mountainous terrain along Myanmar's borders along Thailand and China.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Russia is experiencing mixed luck.

Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand all endorsed a U.N. General Assembly resolution that demanded Russia "immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine."

Tiny, wealthy Singapore took Southeast Asia's hardest stance and copied some U.S. sanctions barring transactions with top Russian financial institutions. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong offered a strong condemnation of what he called the "unprovoked attack by Russia on Ukraine" in an Oval Office meeting with President Biden Wednesday.

"The sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity of all countries, big and small, must be respected," Mr. Lee said. "The unprovoked military invasion of a sovereign country under any pretext is unacceptable."

	<p>The one-party regimes in Vietnam and Laos abstained on the U.N. resolution. Both countries' communist nationalists achieved victory with Soviet military assistance during the 1965-75 U.S.-Vietnam war, plus economic aid during the 1980s.</p> <p>Since 1995, Vietnam has relied heavily on Russian weapons, including submarines and fighter jets, buying \$8 billion in Russian military hardware and turning Moscow into Hanoi's biggest weapons supplier. Earlier this year, Hanoi and Moscow celebrated their 20th anniversary of strategic partnership.</p> <p>Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte meanwhile appears wary of trying to circumvent U.S.-led sanctions and may cancel plans to buy Russian weapons, although he noted in a March 17 interview that he considers Mr. Putin "a personal friend."</p> <p>Muslim-majority Indonesia considered buying squadrons of Russian SU-35 fighter jets but switched to Western manufacturers during international brinkmanship weeks before the invasion.</p> <p>Reacting to the Russia-Ukraine war, Indonesia's Foreign Ministry said Jakarta believed that "the territorial integrity of a country must be adhered to, and [condemned] any action that clearly constitutes a violation of the territory and sovereignty of a country."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Skepticism: tap reserve to blunt prices
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/31/biden-release-oil-reserves-blunt-gas-prices-draws/
GIST	<p>President Biden's announcement Thursday that the U.S. will release nearly 200 million barrels of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve over the next several months was met with skepticism from Republicans, energy experts and even some in his own party.</p> <p>Both allies and foes were unsure that the planned release from the stockpile of a million barrels a day — about 5% of the 20 million used daily in the U.S. — for the next six months will have any impact on record-high gas prices.</p> <p>"This is a wartime bridge to increase oil supply until production ramps up later this year," Mr. Biden said. "I'm going to continue to use every tool at my disposal to protect you from Putin's price hike. It's not the time for politics. Americans can't afford that right now."</p> <p>The move to dip into reserves typically tapped only during emergencies, such as natural disasters, as a mechanism to lower prices underscores the political pressure on the president.</p> <p>The midterms are just months away and polls this month have left Mr. Biden and Democrats worried about a voter backlash.</p> <p>"High gas prices are a political nightmare. Democrats are staring at the midterms," longtime oil markets analyst Dan Dicker said in an interview. "It can drive prices down. How much? My guess is not a whole bunch. It won't fundamentally make a difference in demand. In the short period, it can scare the bejesus out of traders."</p> <p>As of Thursday afternoon, oil markets were down. WTI crude, the U.S. benchmark, was down nearly \$7 per barrel to roughly \$101 and Brent crude, the global benchmark, was down about \$5.50 to around \$108. The national average for a regular gallon of gas was \$4.23, down one penny from a week ago and up \$1.36 from one year ago.</p> <p>Mr. Biden characterized his move as yet another way to continue waging economic war against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine by adding to the global supply of oil.</p> <p>He said the U.S. is urging other countries to release more oil from their reserves.</p>

Patrick De Haan, founder of the fuel-price tracking service GasBuddy, expressed concern over depleting U.S. reserves from the 568 million barrels on hand to 388 million, which would be the lowest level since 1984, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

The Biden release, as planned, would also constitute the largest ever drawdown of the reserve.

“The [Strategic Petroleum Reserve] is not the strategic price reserve and should not be used [in my opinion] unless it is absolutely necessary, though the consumer side of me prefers lower #gasprices,” Mr. De Haan wrote in a series of tweets. “I just think we ought to be careful.”

Most Democrats praised Mr. Biden for not only the release of oil but also a new provision that would create a use-it-lost-it type policy that charges oil companies fees for unused drilling permits on public lands and in waters.

However, some members of the president’s party, which has long accused Big Oil of price gouging drivers at the pump, expressed a degree of doubt that savings would be passed along to consumers by energy companies amid record profits.

“We would hope that there would be some relationship between the price of oil coming down, the president releasing one million [barrels] per day for the next six months [and] increasing supply,” House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, California Democrat, told reporters. “Supply usually lowers cost. We’ll just see how that is reflected.”

Sen. Martin Heinrich, New Mexico Democrat, cited concern over the common phenomenon known as “rockets and feathers” that describes how gas prices shoot up like a rocket with rising energy costs but then fall like a feather, despite drops in oil prices.

“I think it will certainly create the space to lower gas prices. We’ll have to see if they choose to do that or if they pass those margins along to their shareholders,” Mr. Heinrich said.

The latest release of oil will mark the third time in recent months that Mr. Biden has dipped into the strategic reserves. He released 50 million barrels in November as energy prices began to rise sharply and another 30 million earlier this month following Moscow’s war against Ukraine and the U.S. banning Russian energy imports, both actions that skyrocketed prices.

As they did both times in the past, Republicans chalked up the latest release as a “political gimmick.”

“Whether it’s gas, whether it’s groceries, whether it’s critical things people need at home, you’re now at a 40-year high for inflation. These are very sharp increases,” said Sen. John Barrasso, Wyoming Republican and ranking member of the Senate Energy Committee. “The president is desperate.”

The American Petroleum Institute, a lobbying firm for the oil and natural gas industry, said that while Mr. Biden’s action “may provide some short-term relief, it is far from a long-term solution.”

“The “best thing the White House can do right now is to remove barriers to investment in American energy production and infrastructure,” API President and CEO Mike Sommers said.

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HEADLINE	03/31 BA.2 subvariant dominant strain in WA
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/ba-2-subvariant-is-the-predominant-strain-in-washington
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. - The omicron subvariant BA.2 is now the most common strain in Washington state, the Washington State Department of Health announced on Wednesday</p> <p>During a news conference, the health department said it continued to see positive trends in the state, and cases rates and hospitalizations continued to fall.</p>

	<p>As of last week the BA.2 strain accounts for 51% of the state's cases and the CDC is reporting that the strain accounts for 55% nationally.</p> <p>"The trajectory continues to be on the decline and this is a promising sign of the pace of where we are in the pandemic," Shah said.</p> <p>This version of the coronavirus, which scientists call BA.2, is widely considered stealthier than the original version of omicron because particular genetic traits make it somewhat harder to detect.</p> <p>"Think about this as another phase of the pandemic," said Shah. "Things are absolutely better. We want to continue to see that but don't let off the guard completely and say, 'We are done, we are out of this and we're moving forward,' because that is when people may get into trouble."</p> <p>One in four new COVID-19 cases sequenced at UW Medicine's virology lab is from the omicron BA.2 subvariant.</p> <p>Health officials are reminding people to continue to wear masks when it is appropriate or keep them around, have test kits and stay updated on vaccinations.</p> <p>"Data continues to show that the COVID-19 vaccines offer powerful and substantial protections against severe illness, hospitalization and death," said assistant secretary Michele Roberts.</p> <p>Health officials said they will continue to monitor the spread of the variant.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Dangerous conditions for pedestrians
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/numbers-show-dangerous-conditions-for-pedestrians-across-the-state
GIST	<p>The problem of pedestrian safety coming into focus after several deadly incidents now bringing more attention to how people need to stay aware and safe when walking along our roads.</p> <p>Traffic safety officials say it's at intersections where one third of crashes are reported and while there are crosswalks and signals indicating when it's safe to cross – people are still dying crossing the street at alarming rates – deadly incidents they say increase after dark.</p> <p>Washington Traffic Safety Commission started Target Zero in 2000 – hoping to put an end to the number of people killed on the roads.</p> <p>Director, Shelly Baldwin, says they've made progress since, but there have been setbacks.</p> <p>"We watched a lot of that progress disappear during COVID and this has been a really tough realization," Baldwin said.</p> <p>Washington Traffic Safety Commission data shows 70 pedestrians were killed in 2002 that number up 133 in 2021.</p> <p>"It's unacceptable. It's preventable. And we should be doing everything we can to make sure everybody gets home to their families save everything, no matter how they travel," Baldwin said.</p> <p>Safer or not – one thing is for sure – deadly traffic incidents have increased 24% prior to COVID.</p> <p>Washington State Patrol is investigating after one person was killed in a hit-and-run in Skagit County. "Pedestrian deaths are at our highest number in decades," Baldwin said.</p>

WSDOT's latest numbers dating back five years, show 2,508 pedestrians were hit, 405 were hurt and 103 killed in 2018.

The number of incidents decreased by 232 in 2019 but the number of deaths increased to 107 and once again in 2020 to 112 and again to 131 in 2021.

"It's an unpalatable number for me, of families that have been grieving for this loss. It's very, very difficult," Baldwin said.

Loved one's families across the state are now mourning.

"When we think about pedestrian fatalities, one of the biggest, most obvious factors is speed," Baldwin said. "When a vehicle is traveling above 20 miles an hour, we start to lose the chance that a human body can withstand that force."

Washington Traffic Safety Commission is focused on decreasing the loss of life, as the deadliest months July, August, September and November are right around the corner.

Their goal is to educate both— drivers and pedestrians.

"It's really incumbent upon drivers to remember that every corner is a crosswalk, whether it's marked or not, and it is the duty of the driver to yield to pedestrians," Baldwin said.

Traffic safety officials say the newly approved infrastructure bill will get them 30% in extra funding to combat the issue.

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HEADLINE	03/31 US: Russia lacks battlefield commander
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/us/politics/russia-military-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Russia is running its military campaign against Ukraine out of Moscow, with no central war commander on the ground to call the shots, according to American officials who have studied the five-week-old war.</p> <p>That centralized approach may go a long way to explain why the Russian war effort has struggled in the face of stiffer-than-expected Ukrainian resistance, the officials said.</p> <p>The lack of a unifying military leader in Ukraine has meant that Russian air, ground and sea units are not in sync. Their disjointed battlefield campaigns have been plagued by poor logistics, flagging morale and between 7,000 and 15,000 military deaths, senior U.S. officials and independent analysts say.</p> <p>It has also contributed to the deaths of at least seven Russian generals as high-ranking officers are pushed to the front lines to untangle tactical problems that Western militaries would leave to more junior officers or senior enlisted personnel.</p> <p>A senior American official said that NATO officials and the intelligence community had spent weeks waiting for a Russian war commander to emerge. No one has, leaving Western officials to conclude that the men making decisions are far from the fight, back in Moscow: Defense Minister Sergei K. Shoigu; Gen. Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the general staff of the Russian military; and even President Vladimir V. Putin.</p> <p>On Wednesday, Biden administration officials, citing declassified U.S. intelligence, said that Mr. Putin had been misinformed by his advisers about the Russian military's problems in Ukraine. The intelligence, American officials said, also showed what appeared to be growing tension between Mr. Putin and Mr. Shoigu, who was once among the most trusted members of the Kremlin's inner circle.</p>

Russian officials have disputed the American intelligence assertion, with the Kremlin on Thursday calling it a “complete misunderstanding” of the situation that could have “bad consequences.”

But it is hard to run a military campaign from 500 miles away, U.S. military officials said. The distance alone, they said, can lead to a disconnect between the troops who are doing the fighting and the war plans being drawn up in Moscow. Instead of streamlining the process, they said, Russia has created a military machine that is unable to adapt to a quick and nimble Ukrainian resistance.

A second senior American official said that Russian soldiers, who have been taught not to make a single move without explicit instructions from superiors, had been left frustrated on the battlefield, while Mr. Putin, Mr. Shoigu and General Gerasimov continued to plot increasingly out-of-touch strategy.

This top-down approach means that Moscow transmits instructions to generals in the field, who then transmit them to troops, who are told to follow those instructions no matter the situation on the ground.

“It shows up in the mistakes that are being made,” said retired Gen. Wesley K. Clark, who served as NATO’s supreme allied commander for Europe during the Kosovo war.

Last week, Ukrainian forces blew up the Russian warship Orsk, which had docked in southern Ukraine. Describing the incident, General Clark asked: “Who would be crazy enough to dock a ship in a port” before first securing the area?

That the Russian planners who sent the Orsk into the port were inattentive to the potential danger shows that no one is questioning decisions coming from the top, officials said. The troops at the bottom are not empowered to point out flaws in strategy that should be obvious, they said.

Military analysts said a complex chain of events, originating with a broken-down command structure that begins in Moscow, had led to the deaths of the Russian generals.

“I do not see the kind of coherent organizational architecture that one would have expected given the months of exercises and presumably even longer period of planning in advance of the invasion,” retired Gen. David H. Petraeus, who served as the head of the military’s Central Command and as the top commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, said in an email.

In an American war command structure, a four-star field commander would coordinate and synchronize all subordinate air, land and naval forces, as well as special operations and cyberoperations. The campaign would have a main objective, a center of gravity, with operations supporting that goal.

In the case of the deaths of some of the Russian generals, for instance, the problem originated far away from the battlefield, when Moscow did not respond quickly enough after Ukraine jammed Russian communications, the analysts said.

Mr. Putin’s own dishonest portrayal of the mission of the Russian military may have hurt its ability to prosecute the effort, which the Russian president initially presented publicly as a limited military operation.

General Clark recalled teaching a class of Ukrainian generals in 2016 in Kyiv and trying to explain what an American military “after-action review” was. He told them that after a battle involving American troops, “everybody got together and broke down what happened.”

“The colonel has to confess his mistakes in front of the captain,” General Clark said. “He says, ‘Maybe I took too long to give an order.’”

After hearing him out, the Ukrainians, General Clark said, told him that could not work. “They said, ‘We’ve been taught in the Soviet system that information has to be guarded and we lie to each other,’” he recalled.

Mr. Putin's decision to send the Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov to the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol this week for a victory lap despite the fact that Mariupol has not fallen yet demonstrates the Russian president's continued belief that the biggest battle is the information one, said Andrei Soldatov, a Russian security services expert.

The feared Chechen "is a general, not a real military commander," he said, adding, "This shows that what Putin still believes is that propaganda is the most important thing here."

Russian officials are now signaling that Mr. Putin might be lowering his war ambitions and focusing on the eastern Donbas region, though military analysts said it remained to be seen whether that would constitute a meaningful shift or a maneuver to distract attention ahead of another offensive.

The Russian army has already committed more than half of its total combat forces to the fight, including its most elite units. Moscow is now tapping reinforcements from outside Russia, including Georgia, as well as rushing mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a private military company, to eastern Ukraine.

Mr. Putin has also signed a decree calling up 134,000 conscripts.

"They seem to have no coherent concept of the amount of force it will take to defeat the Ukrainian regular and territorial forces in urban terrain, and to retain what they destroy or overrun," said Jeffrey J. Schloesser, a retired two-star Army general who commanded U.S. forces in eastern Afghanistan. "Hundreds of thousands of more Russian or allied troops will be necessary to do so."

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HEADLINE	03/31 Hope: tap oil reserve, bring down prices
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/business/energy-environment/biden-oil-strategic-petroleum-reserve.html
GIST	<p>Under growing pressure to bring down high energy prices, President Biden announced on Thursday that the United States would release up to 180 million barrels of oil from a strategic reserve to counteract the economic impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>With midterm elections just months away, gasoline prices have risen nearly \$1.50 a gallon over the last year, undercutting consumer confidence. And the cost of diesel, the fuel used by most farmers and shippers, has climbed even faster, threatening to push up already high inflation on all manner of goods and services.</p> <p>"I know how much it hurts," Mr. Biden said Thursday as he announced the plan. "As you've heard me say before, I grew up in a family like many of you where the price of a gallon gasoline went up, it was a discussion at the kitchen table."</p> <p>Mr. Biden has few tools to control commodity prices that are set on global markets, so he is turning to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, ordering the largest release since that emergency stockpile was established in the early 1970s. But the move will most likely have a modest impact because it cannot make up for all the oil, diesel and other fuels that Russia used to sell to the world but is no longer able to.</p> <p>"Our prices are rising because of Putin's action," Mr. Biden added, referring to President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. "There isn't enough supply. And the bottom line is if we want lower gas prices, we need to have more oil supply right now."</p> <p>Mr. Biden's plan, to release one million barrels of oil a day for 180 days, would represent roughly 5 percent of American demand and 1 percent of global demand. To put that in context, Russian oil exports are down about three million barrels a day. The U.S. benchmark oil price fell about 6 percent on Thursday.</p>

The administration's announcement came as Russia conveyed mixed signals about its aims for the war in Ukraine, now in its sixth week. Despite Kremlin claims that it was withdrawing from the outskirts of Kyiv, the capital, fighting continued in that area on Thursday, and Western officials said they saw little evidence of a Russian pullback.

"Russia maintains pressure on Kyiv and other cities, so we can expect additional offensive actions, bringing even more suffering," the NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said at a news conference.

Russian officials also said they would allow a respite for greater humanitarian access to the devastated southeast port of Mariupol, once home to 400,000 people, which has come to symbolize Russia's battlefield tactic of indiscriminate destruction. Previous agreements for pauses in fighting around Mariupol have repeatedly broken down.

Largely as a result of the ceaseless war, energy experts expect oil prices to stay high for a while without big interventions like the U.S. reserve release.

Reaction from the oil industry to Mr. Biden's announcement was muted. The reserve has mostly been used to increase the supply of oil during wars, foreign threats to energy supplies or natural disasters. Smaller reserve releases by the Biden administration starting late last year have had little impact on the prices that drivers and businesses pay for fuel.

"It will lower the oil price a little and encourage more demand," said Scott Sheffield, chief executive of Pioneer Natural Resources, a major Texas oil company. "But it is still a Band-Aid on a significant shortfall of supply."

The American Petroleum Institute, which represents oil and gas companies, said Mr. Biden ought to encourage domestic oil production by reducing regulations. The reserve "was put in place to reduce the impact of significant supply chain disruptions," said Mike Sommers, the group's president, "and while today's release may provide some short-term relief, it is far from a long-term solution to the economic pain Americans are feeling at the pump."

After sinking to historically low levels during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, oil prices have been climbing for the last year, reaching their highest levels in nearly a decade.

Oil exploration and production in the United States and elsewhere slid during the pandemic, and still has not quite recovered. American companies, under pressure from investors, have been cautious about spending too much money to drill new wells, lest prices fall again. Instead, many have been paying out larger dividends and buying back their stock.

While that calculation might make sense for individual businesses, it has caused political problems for Democrats who had hoped to reduce the use of fossil fuels to address climate change. Now, under attack from Republicans for high prices, Mr. Biden and Democrats are trying to get the oil industry to drill more.

Both sides of the political divide are eyeing the November congressional election, when inflation is expected to be a major issue.

Reacting to news of the release from the reserve, a spokesman for Representative Kevin McCarthy, the Republican leader in the House, accused the president of "attacks on American energy production in order to fulfill his campaign promise to 'get rid of fossil fuels.'"

Mark Bednar, the spokesman, added: "As a result, the American people are paying the price, as gas is more than \$4 per gallon, and we are more reliant on other countries for energy."

But Senator Joe Manchin III, Democrat of West Virginia, welcomed the Biden announcement, saying it would “provide much-needed relief while also allowing for the simultaneous ramping up of domestic oil and gas production to backfill Russian energy resources.”

Aides to Mr. Biden are hoping to blunt Republican criticisms by taking actions to try to lower prices. In a statement about the oil release Thursday morning, the White House said that Mr. Biden was “committed to doing everything in his power to help American families who are paying more out of pocket as a result.”

They are also trying to pin some of the blame for high prices on oil companies, which the administration argues are not producing more energy to increase their profits. The administration plans to call on Congress to require companies to produce oil on more than 12 million acres of federal lands that are already permitted for extraction or pay fines, a proposal that will probably face an uphill climb.

Energy experts said the reserve release would pack more punch if other countries, like China, also sold oil from their stockpiles. The International Energy Agency, an organization of more than 30 countries, will meet Friday and may recommend further releases from national reserves.

Russian oil exports normally represent more than one of every 10 barrels the world consumes. The United States, Britain and Canada have stopped importing Russian oil, and many oil companies and shippers in Europe have voluntarily stopped buying Russia’s energy products. That has produced a deficit so far of about three million barrels a day.

The average price of regular gasoline in the United States is \$4.23 a gallon, according to AAA, the motor club. That’s about the same as it was a week ago but up 62 cents a gallon in the last month.

Oil prices had dropped this week after peace talks between Russia and Ukraine showed the first signs of progress. Energy traders are also concerned that demand could fall as China, the world’s largest oil importer, imposes lockdowns in Shanghai and other places to deal with coronavirus outbreaks.

“The price effect is likely to be short term,” David Goldwyn, who was a senior State Department official in the Obama administration, said about Mr. Biden’s announcement. “But part of the benefit of this release is that it will provide a bridge to when new physical supply comes online in the second half of this year from the U.S., Canada, Brazil and other countries.”

Some environmentalists criticized the reserve release. “Putting more oil on the market is not the solution to our problem but the perpetuation of our problem,” said Mark Brownstein, a senior vice president at the Environmental Defense Fund.

But Meghan L. O’Sullivan, director of the Geopolitics of Energy Project at Harvard’s Kennedy School, said releasing reserves to ease shortages would not imperil the transition to clean energy. “What the last month has told us is that if there is no energy security today, the appetite for taking hard steps on the path of transition will evaporate,” she said.

The release is not without risk. Goldman Sachs analysts wrote in a research note that a large discharge could cause “congestion” on the Gulf Coast, keeping new oil production from fields in West Texas out of pipelines and storage tanks.

Mr. Biden’s move could also discourage Saudi Arabia and other producers from increasing supply to reduce prices. OPEC Plus, a group led by Saudi Arabia that includes Russia, on Thursday decided to maintain a policy of only modestly increasing supply.

Bob McNally, who was an energy adviser to President George W. Bush, said the release was “not big enough to offset the potential loss of Russian oil exports should the conflict and sanctions pressure continue to extend.”

	<p>The oil market tends to go in cycles, so the release may allow the government to sell high and, later, buy low, potentially earning billions of dollars for the Treasury. The government will use the money it makes from oil sales to refill the reserve, which in turn could help raise prices again.</p> <p>While pushing up those prices, Jason Bordoff, founding director of Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy and a former aide to President Barack Obama, said an eventual refill could also "send a signal to shale producers that may help encourage them to invest in more production, which may help with today's potential shortages."</p> <p>The U.S. reserve contains nearly 600 million barrels, approximately a month of total American consumption, and it can release up to 4.4 million barrels a day. The stockpile was established after the 1973 energy crisis, when Saudi Arabia and other Arab producers proclaimed an oil embargo.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Poll: Russians rally around Putin
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/putin-approval-rating-russia.html
GIST	<p>President Vladimir V. Putin's approval ratings have reached levels unseen in years, according to an independent poll released on Thursday, as many Russians rally around the flag in the face of mounting international pressure.</p> <p>Eighty-three percent of Russians said they approved of Mr. Putin's actions, up from 69 percent in January, according to a poll by the Levada Center, an independent pollster in Moscow. Ratings of many other government institutions, as well as the governing party, have also gone up, the poll indicated.</p> <p>Some observers believe polls in Russia do not reflect public opinion accurately, with many people giving answers they believe are socially acceptable, but they are widely considered useful tools in gauging the dynamics of people's moods.</p> <p>Many Russians live in a world, as presented by state-run media, where there is no war with Ukraine. Instead, their country is carrying out "a special military operation" to uproot far-right extremists in a brotherly country that went off track and has been pushed by Western countries to turn against Moscow.</p> <p>The Kremlin has moved to silence most independent media in Russia, forcing some to flee or suspend operations, and others to self-censor. Russia has blocked access to social media platforms, including Facebook, and major foreign news outlets, and enacted a law to punish anyone spreading "false information" about its Ukraine invasion with up to 15 years in prison. Thousands have been arrested in recent weeks at antiwar protests, according to human rights activists.</p> <p>The poll by Levada — which has been declared a "foreign agent" in Russia — was conducted among more than 1,600 people across the country, with the margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percentage points.</p> <p>Denis Volkov, Levada's director, said that initial feelings of "shock and confusion" that many Russians felt at the start of the Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine was being replaced with the belief that Russia is besieged and that its people must rally around their leader.</p> <p>"The confrontation with the West has consolidated people," Mr. Volkov said, adding that some respondents said that while they generally did not support Mr. Putin, now was the time to do so.</p> <p>According to that line of thinking, he said, people believe that "everyone is against us" and that "Putin defends us, otherwise we would be eaten alive."</p> <p>Mr. Volkov compared the prevailing mood in Russia to the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, although he said the national feeling today was much darker.</p>

	<p>“There is no euphoria, because this time the situation is much more serious and difficult,” he said. “There are victims, and it is unclear when it will all end.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Syria fighters join Russia forces in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/middleeast/syrian-mercenaries-ukraine-russia.html
GIST	<p>BEIRUT, Lebanon — Hundreds of Syrian fighters are en route to join Russian forces in Ukraine, effectively returning the favor to Moscow for helping President Bashar al-Assad crush rebels in an 11-year civil war, according to two people monitoring the flow of mercenaries.</p> <p>A first contingent of soldiers has already arrived in Russia for military training before heading to Ukraine, according to a Western diplomat and a Damascus-based ally of the Syrian government. It includes at least 300 soldiers from a Syrian army division that has worked closely with Russian officers who went to Syria to support Mr. al-Assad during the war.</p> <p>And many more could be on the way: Recruiters across Syria have been drawing up lists of thousands of interested candidates to be vetted by the Syrian security services and then passed to the Russians.</p> <p>Syria has grown in recent years into an exporter of mercenaries, a grim aftereffect of years of war that gave many men combat experience but so damaged the country’s economy that people now struggle to find work. So they have deployed as guns-for-hire to wars in Libya, Azerbaijan, the Central African Republic — and now Ukraine.</p> <p>“In general, money is the motivation,” said Bassam Alahmad, the head of Syrians for Truth and Justice, an advocacy group that has researched the Syrian mercenary trade. Some Syrians feel loyalty to Russia because of its support for Mr. al-Assad, he said, while others sign up to fight because they simply need the money and believe recruiters’ promises that they will have noncombat jobs, such as guarding bases or oil facilities.</p> <p>“Some people don’t mind fighting, but there are groups that are definitely taking advantage of people’s needs,” Mr. Alahmad said. “The result is the same: People are paying this price. People are participating in wars that aren’t theirs.”</p> <p>On Wednesday, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said that about 1,000 mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a Russian military contractor, were already in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine, where Russia has installed two separatist enclaves, and that they included Syrians.</p> <p>Syria’s long-running war drew in foreign powers such as Iran, Turkey, Russia and the United States, all of which worked with Syrian military groups on the ground to advance their interests.</p> <p>Some of those partnerships now facilitate mercenary traffic.</p> <p>Russia and Turkey together dispatched about 10,000 Syrian fighters to bolster their preferred sides in the conflict in Libya, Mr. Alahmad said, and Turkey sent about 2,000 Syrians to Azerbaijan during last year’s war in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.</p> <p>Russia has sent small numbers of Syrians as far as Venezuela, where Moscow has interests in the oil industry.</p> <p>Using mercenaries is not considered a war crime under the Geneva Conventions, but there is a separate United Nations treaty that criminalizes it. Ukraine is a signatory to that treaty, but Russia is not.</p> <p>“What we are seeing is predatory recruitment,” said Sorcha MacLeod, the chair of the United Nations Working Group on the use of mercenaries. “They are taking advantage of the poor socioeconomic situation that these people find themselves in.”</p>

The war in Ukraine could pull in large numbers of Syrians, given the scope of the battle, the high number of Russian dead and wounded and Russia's close ties with the Syrian military. But much about the deployments and activities of Syrian mercenaries remains murky because of the covert nature of their work.

Western officials, experts tracking the issue, recruiters and returned fighters described a messy system in which men with few options scramble for limited opportunities to risk their lives for salaries they could not match at home.

The war in Ukraine has caused interest to spike, and recruiters have launched registration drives across Syria to gather names of men who want to go, according to Mr. Alahmad and a recruiter in southern Syria who is signing men up. The recruiter spoke on condition of anonymity, like others in this article, for fear of repercussions from the Syrian government.

Recruiters often collect payment for registration, and scams are rife.

The recruiter in southern Syria said he started his work after a scammer who had promised him a job in Libya took his money and abandoned him near the city of Latakia in northwest Syria with no way to return home.

He said he had signed up multiple groups to go to Libya, and recently got word that the Russians want as many as 16,000 Syrians to fight in Ukraine. Applicants must be between 20 and 45 years old and weigh between 110 and 200 pounds, he said, adding that those with military experience get priority and that all recruits must be vetted by the Syrian security services.

He and his partner charge applicants about \$7 to apply and earn \$25 for each one who is accepted, he said. The lack of other work and a currency collapse that has made basic items like bread and cooking gas exorbitantly expensive in Syria have driven up interest in Ukraine, with the promise of earning \$1,000-\$2,000 a month.

While some other recruiters play up the benefits and minimize the dangers, he said he makes the danger clear.

"Some people are selling it to them as if they're going to heaven," he said. "You are not going to heaven."

The roughly 300 soldiers already in Russia are from the 25th Division of the Syrian Army, known as the Tiger Forces, which are seen as elite and work closely with Russian officers. The Russians have offered them \$1,200 a month for six months with a \$3,000 bonus when they return to Syria, said the Syrian government ally.

Their families are promised \$2,800, plus \$600 a month for one year, if their loved ones are killed in combat, he said, adding that in Syria, those soldiers earn about \$100 a month, while soldiers from less elite units earn less than \$50 per month.

A commander of a militia made up of fighters from Syria and neighboring countries that received Russian support during the Syrian war said his group had sent another contingent of 85 men to Russia. They included Lebanese, Iraqis and Syrians, he said, adding that more were on the way.

"The Russians helped us when needed it, and now it's time to give back part of what they offered us," the commander said.

A Syrian man who returned recently from fighting in Libya said he had gone solely for the money, but would never do it again.

	<p>Once he was in Libya, where he guarded oil and other facilities, his three-month contract was extended to six, and his salary was cut from \$1,000 to \$800 a month, he said. His food, water and lodging were supposed to be covered, but he said he slept in a tent with other men, ate mostly rice and bread and had to buy drinking water.</p> <p>He was happy to make it home and used his earnings to clear his debts and open a cigarette shop, he said. But his activities had left a social stain that could hurt his marriage prospects, he said.</p> <p>He tells anyone who will listen not to go to Ukraine.</p> <p>“People who go there will die,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 US opens 35,000 more seasonal work visas
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/us/politics/us-seasonal-worker-visas.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Biden administration, responding to an increasing demand for temporary workers, announced on Thursday that it would make an additional 35,000 seasonal worker visas available for American businesses to hire foreign workers ahead of the coming summer months.</p> <p>The visa program being expanded, known as the H-2B visa program, allows American businesses to hire foreign workers for seasonal nonagricultural jobs like mowing lawns, cleaning hotel rooms, staffing amusement parks and waiting tables. Industries like landscaping, hospitality and tourism are particularly reliant on foreign nationals to meet high demand during the busy summer months.</p> <p>Alejandro N. Mayorkas, the secretary of homeland security, said in a statement that the decision was “informed by current demand in the labor market” in order to “help to support American businesses.”</p> <p>The number of H-2B visas is normally capped at 33,000 for six months of each fiscal year. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced at the beginning of March that it had already met the cap for the period from April to September.</p> <p>Last April, the Department of Homeland Security said it would make available an additional 22,000 seasonal worker visas after U.S. employers expressed a need for additional workers. And in December, the administration moved to make available an additional 20,000 of the visas — the first time that the number was expanded for the winter season, which typically sees less demand than the summertime.</p> <p>Of the 35,000 additional visas made available for this summer, 23,500 will be available to returning workers from the last three years, while 11,500 will be reserved for foreign nationals from Haiti, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.</p> <p>While the expansion is likely to be welcomed by employers that are looking to fill lower-wage jobs, some labor groups and those who want to restrict immigration argue that the visa program takes away opportunities from American workers and depresses wages. In order to hire foreign workers on an H-2B visa, employers must first prove to the Labor Department that they are unable to find American workers to meet their needs.</p> <p>U.S. businesses as varied as landscaping companies, amusement parks, restaurants and crab trappers have described how they continue to struggle to hire Americans to fill open positions. The coronavirus pandemic also disrupted the flow of foreign workers into the United States over the last two years. But as the job market has rebounded, many employers have contended with job seekers within the United States with more leverage and less of an appetite for low-level jobs.</p> <p>“Even with these additional visas, there’s not nearly enough visas for all of the types of workers that employers want to hire on the H-2B program,” said Stephen W. Yale-Loehr, an immigration lawyer</p>

	<p>who teaches at Cornell Law School. “But in the short term, at least, this is something the administration can do to help immediately.”</p> <p>In his statement, Mr. Mayorkas acknowledged that foreign workers who fill seasonal positions could face exploitation by employers. He said that the administration would crack down on such violations.</p> <p>“Recognizing the importance of strong worker protections,” he said, “we will apply greater scrutiny to those employers who have a record of violating obligations to their workers and the H-2B program.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Pakistan prime minister refuses to resign
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/asia/imran-khan-resign-pakistan.html
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Facing the near certain prospect of being removed from office in a no-confidence vote in a matter of days, Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan refused to resign in a defiant speech on Thursday, doubling down on his allegations of a foreign conspiracy against him and deepening a political crisis that has embroiled the country for weeks.</p> <p>In a televised speech, Mr. Khan accused the United States of a conspiracy to topple his government by inciting a political campaign to remove him from office. He also declared that he would face the no-confidence vote in Parliament, which is expected on Sunday, despite having lost a parliamentary majority this week.</p> <p>“I have never accepted defeat,” Mr. Khan, the former international cricket star turned politician, said. “I always fight till the last ball. I want the entire nation to see on that day who sold their conscience.”</p> <p>For weeks, Pakistan has been gripped by a political crisis after Mr. Khan, 69, appeared to lose support from the country’s powerful military last year and a coalition of opposition parties moved to vote him out of office this month.</p> <p>The tide appeared to turn against him this week, after some members of his political party defected and several parties in his governing coalition split away — appearing to give the opposition the 177 votes, five more than needed in the 342-member National Assembly to remove him from office.</p> <p>With his political support slipping away, Mr. Khan has scrambled to keep his coalition intact: He gathered thousands of supporters at a rally in Islamabad on Sunday, replaced the chief minister of Punjab to retain the support of one allied party and repeatedly denounced opponents as part of a foreign conspiracy against him.</p> <p>In recent days, he has centered his political messaging around a purported letter that contained threats to his government. Officials said the letter was written by a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States, who conveyed threats by a “senior foreign official.”</p> <p>“We received an official document which we must say is against our people,” Mr. Khan said in the speech on Thursday, adding that the letter warned that “Pakistan can face severe consequences if I survive no confidence.”</p> <p>At a political rally on Sunday, he displayed a piece of paper that he took from his pocket, which he said was evidence of a foreign conspiracy but did not say by which country. He has revealed few other details about the letter and has not provided a copy to Parliament or to the news media.</p> <p>In his speech on Thursday, he identified the threatening country as the United States, which has long been a favorite target of his political speeches.</p> <p>He said that American officials said that Pakistan “will have to suffer” if he remained as prime minister.</p>

“No reason was stated,” he said. “They are treating Pakistan as if we are their slaves.”

American officials dismissed Mr. Khan’s characterization of events.

“There is no truth to these allegations,” a State Department spokeswoman said Thursday, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with diplomatic protocol.

Opposition politicians have cast doubt on the letter’s authenticity and Pakistani security officials have dismissed it as an internal diplomatic communication that Mr. Khan has misrepresented.

The political crisis comes as Pakistan, home to 220 million people and the second-largest Muslim population in the world, wrestles with double-digit inflation that has pushed the cost of basic goods, like food and fuel, beyond many Pakistanis’ reach. The economic challenges have fueled criticism that Mr. Khan has mismanaged the economy and failed to deliver on his touchstone promise of creating an Islamist welfare state.

As dissatisfaction with his government grew, his opponents announced their intention to move for a no-confidence motion in Parliament. Since securing the votes needed to oust him from office, opposition leaders have urged him to resign and have assailed his claims of an international conspiracy as undermining the country’s democratic process.

“He has been advised by some people to call a democratic process an international conspiracy,” said Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, chairman of the opposition Pakistan Peoples Party. “They are only doing it for their own interests — not the country’s interest. This is against the country. This is against our Constitution, democracy and the nation.”

Lawmakers had been expected to begin debate on the no-confidence vote on Thursday evening, but the National Assembly session was adjourned within minutes of opening after a boisterous protest by the opposition when the government tried to delay the debate.

If Mr. Khan is voted out of office, lawmakers will choose an interim prime minister to serve until the next general election, scheduled for 2023. Many analysts expect they will select Shehbaz Sharif, an opposition leader.

Mr. Sharif is the younger brother of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and is the former chief minister of Punjab, the country’s most populous and prosperous province.

In his speech Thursday night, Mr. Khan defended his government’s three-and-a-half year record, claiming that he outperformed his rivals’ past governments, and emphasized the earlier achievements in his life.

“I am a very fortunate person,” he said. “God gave me everything, fame, money.” He said that he entered politics to make Pakistan an independent, self-respecting country.

Mr. Khan also warned that even if he lost the no-confidence vote, he would not let the conspiracy against him succeed, hinting that he may seek to return to Parliament as a member of the opposition.

“The people will neither forget nor forgive you,” he said, referring to his opponents. “Neither will they forgive those who are handling you. The people will always remember that you sold your country. Through a foreign conspiracy, you tried to topple a government that had an independent foreign policy.”

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HEADLINE	03/31 CDC: steep decline teen mental health
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/03/31/student-mental-health-decline-cdc/

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is warning of an accelerating mental health crisis among adolescents, with more than 4 in 10 teens reporting that they feel “persistently sad or hopeless,” and 1 in 5 saying they have contemplated suicide, according to the results of a survey published Thursday.

“These data echo a cry for help,” said Debra Houry, a deputy director at the CDC. “The COVID-19 pandemic has created traumatic stressors that have the potential to further erode students’ mental well-being.”

The findings draw on a survey of a nationally representative sample of 7,700 teens conducted in the first six months of 2021, when they were in the midst of their first full pandemic school year. They were questioned on a range of topics, including their mental health, alcohol and drug use, and whether they had encountered violence at home or at school. They were also asked about whether they had encountered racism.

Although young people were spared the brunt of the virus — falling ill and dying at much lower rates than older people — they might still pay a steep price for the pandemic, having come of age while weathering isolation, uncertainty, economic turmoil and, for many, grief.

It’s not the first time officials have warned of a mental health crisis among teens. In October, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health, saying that its members were “caring for young people with soaring rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality that will have lasting impacts on them, their families, and their communities.”

In December, Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued an advisory on protecting youth mental health.

“The pandemic era’s unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced,” Murthy wrote. “It would be a tragedy if we beat back one public health crisis only to allow another to grow in its place.”

The CDC survey paints a portrait of a generation reeling from the pandemic, grappling with food insecurity, academic struggles, poor health and abuse at home.

The CDC survey paints a portrait of a generation reeling from the pandemic, grappling with food insecurity, academic struggles, poor health and abuse at home. Nearly 30% of the teens surveyed said a parent or other adult in their home lost work during the pandemic, and a quarter struggled with hunger. Two-thirds said they had difficulty with schoolwork.

But the survey also offers hope, finding that teens who feel connected at school report much lower rates of poor health. The finding calls attention to the critical role schools can play in a student’s mental health.

“School connectedness is a key to addressing youth adversities at all times — [but] especially during times of severe disruptions,” said Kathleen A. Ethier, who heads the CDC’s division of adolescent and school health. “Students need our support now more than ever, whether by making sure that their schools are inclusive and safe, or by providing opportunities to engage in their communities and be mentored by supportive adults.”

Concerns about adolescent mental health were rising before the pandemic: Teens had been reporting poor mental health at higher rates. Between 2009 and 2019, the percentage of teens who reported having “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” rose from 26% to 37%. In 2021, the figure rose to 44%.

The survey results also underscore the particular vulnerability of LGBTQ students, who reported higher rates of suicide attempts and poor mental health. Nearly half of gay, lesbian and bisexual teens said they had contemplated suicide during the pandemic, compared with 14% of their heterosexual peers.

Girls, too, reported faring worse than boys. They were twice as likely to report poor mental health. More than 1 in 4 girls reported that they had seriously contemplated attempting suicide during the pandemic, twice the rate of boys. They also reported higher rates of drinking and tobacco use than boys.

The study also shed light on household stresses. One in 10 teens reported being physically abused at home, and more than half reported emotional abuse, including being insulted, put down or sworn at.

The survey also revealed that students who felt connected at school fared far better than those who did not. Teens who said they felt “close to people at school” were far less likely to report having attempted or thought about attempting suicide, and they were far less likely to report poor mental health than those who did not feel connected at school. The same held true for teens who felt connected virtually to friends, family members and clubs.

“Comprehensive strategies that improve connections with others at home, in the community, and at school might foster improved mental health among youths during and after the pandemic,” the report concluded.

Mental health resources for young people

- For a life-threatening emergency: Call 911.
- For suicide prevention, contact the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) and connect to local resources:

1-800-273-8255 (English)

1-888-628-9454 (Español)

1-800-799-4889 (Deaf or hard of hearing)

- For other youth-specific resources, follow [this link](#).

Warning signs of suicide

If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts or have concerns about someone else who may be, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You will be routed to a local crisis center where professionals can talk you through a risk assessment and provide resources in your community. **The more of the signs below that a person shows, the greater the risk of suicide.**

- Talking about wanting to die
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated or recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Source: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

John Gies, the principal of Shelby High School in Shelby, Ohio, said he noticed a rise in the number of his students who were “struggling.” Sometimes, they would not make eye contact. Other times, students without previous disciplinary issues acted out and ended up in his office.

So he used some of the money the school received from the American Rescue Plan to connect more students with counseling, and created an arrangement to bring counselors from a local counseling center to school several times a week. The school has created a support group for grieving students and for a cohort of freshmen who educators worry could fall through the cracks.

“The mental health struggle had been there” before the pandemic, Gies said. “The pandemic really brought it to the surface and made it actually a little bit worse.”

HEADLINE	03/31 Lower enrollment in Seattle public schools
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/education/lower-enrollment-seattle-public-schools/281-88a0083b-d2a1-43b3-b050-c936a58e0e89
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — At Wedgwood Elementary, a program that turns out big performances has received nothing but praise from parent Miranda Lu.</p> <p>“Our multi-arts teacher actually stitched together little clips,” said Lu. “She basically made a virtual concert for every class, and each class had their own song.”</p> <p>It meant the show went on even during remote learning. But parents are worried about what next year will bring.</p> <p>“At the school level, parents have been really concerned,” said Lu.</p> <p>It is an issue being felt districtwide.</p> <p>Enrollment projections are used to determine the budget, and right now enrollment is down, according to Seattle Public Schools. On the district's website, it states the district budgeted for 52,165 students this school year, but actual enrollment was 1,915 fewer students. The difference resulted in a \$28 million gap in revenue. The district anticipates the lower enrollment will continue, and that means staffing adjustments.</p> <p>At Wedgwood Elementary, parents have been told about some of the possible reductions. For the art teacher, it would still be a full-time schedule, but that time would be split between Wedgwood Elementary and a second school, according to Tim Robinson, district spokesperson.</p> <p>In an email, Robinson wrote, “the school is committed to maintaining the offering of multi-arts and visual arts.”</p> <p>“I realize these are hard decisions, but to us the arts are equally important,” said Erin Bowles, who added that the multi-arts class is one of her daughter's favorites.</p> <p>“I would like to see the school district and the state contribute more funding and keep arts programs as a core source of education for our kids,” said Bowles.</p> <p>Lu said investments need to be made in "our kids and their futures and the future of our community."</p> <p>That's why parents say they are pushing for creative solutions to save the program from budget reductions.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Fewer free Covid testing for uninsured
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/fewer-free-covid-testing-options-uninsured-ba2-variant-spreads-washington/DZ2BQH5TVVBGPK6WFCVZHMXPPE/
GIST	<p>An important heads up - some free COVID testing options are going away. Federal funding has run out for certain programs, which means the uninsured will have to pay out of pocket for PCR tests, depending on the location.</p> <p>The changes will not impact public Washington State-supported testing sites for at least a couple of months, according to the WA Department of Health. However, some private testing locations no longer have free testing for people without insurance.</p> <p>The changes are happening as the state sees an increase in COVID cases caused by the new BA.2 variant. The variant is officially the dominant strain in Washington, making up 51.4% of tests run by UW Medicine's Virology Lab.</p>

“The proportion of BA.2 is rising, so we are bracing ourselves for a slight increase in the number of cases,” said Pavitra Roychoudhury, Ph.D., who heads genomic sequencing with UW Medicine’s Virology Lab.

The uptick is already being seen in King County, where COVID cases increased 42% from last week. Still, the county only sees about 250 cases per day compared to more than 6,500 daily cases during the omicron peak.

“We’re very cautiously optimistic. We are so glad the numbers are low,” Roychoudhury said.

The improved pandemic situation means [funding battles in Congress](#). Money to cover the cost of COVID testing for people without insurance has already dried up.

Quest Diagnostics, which is inside many Safeway pharmacies, says it’s notifying clients and partners that a lab test for people without health insurance will cost about \$125.

“The Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) stopped accepting claims for testing and treatment for uninsured patients due to a lack of sufficient funds. We have begun to notify our clients and partners that we no longer expect to be reimbursed for testing through this program unless additional funding is allocated,” a spokesperson for Quest said in an email.

“It’s a little upsetting,” said Alis Adams, a UW student. “I hope there is some sort of subsidization that can cover the testing, honestly.”

Public Health Seattle-King County says, for now, the funding problem will not impact partner testing locations like the UW Medicine test sites. But that could change in the long term.

The Washington State Department of Health says it has enough money to keep testing free for the uninsured at least until June.

But the city of Seattle says it knows some providers have started charging for tests again on a sliding scale. What happens next depends on Congress -- and a \$15 billion package on the line.

“I think it’s of concern, but I think with a bit of luck, maybe Congress will be motivated in the correct direction. There’s always hope for our government,” said John, a Seattle resident.

The DOH says if you’re insured and unsure if your test will be free, check with the test site first, so you’re not surprised by a bill.

You can still order free rapid tests from the state through the [Say Yes program](#).

The changes so far do not impact people with health insurance, including Medicaid, Medicare, or private insurance.

The city of Seattle provided this additional information on testing:

- The city transferred over its four major COVID testing locations to the UW Labs in Spring 2021. These locations are currently billing insurance for those who have it and covering the cost for uninsured patients. However, these costs are being evaluated.
- The city is working with its healthcare providers to evaluate the impact the end of this funding will have on their communities. There are some providers in the City that have had to shift and reimplement their sliding scale policies.
- The city is in communication with our local health jurisdiction, the state and federal staff, to discuss and advocate for funding to support uninsured patients in getting tested and vaccinated.
- For a listing of free COVID-19 testing and vaccination resources please see the King County resources at testing and vaccination sites

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also, for uninsured people, you can still get free at-home tests from the state through the Say Yes program, or from the federal government
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HEADLINE	03/31 Seattle tourism slowly recovering
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/seattle-tourism-slowly-recovering/HPK7GS4QRVAS7LGNC6DMUVHFBQ/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Weeks before the start of the Seattle-based cruise ship season, tourism leaders said their business is rebounding slowly.</p> <p>Visit Seattle reports the number of overnight stays increased 38% in 2021 from the previous year.</p> <p>Hotel occupancy remains well below pre-pandemic highs, and the travel organization said the industry might not fully recover until early 2024.</p> <p>Visit Seattle leaders said the recent cleanup of downtown sidewalks is helping, and tourists on Thursday told KIRO 7 they felt safe.</p> <p>“I think the downtown is really clean, considering everything going on,” said Teri-Dawn Wells, visiting from Vancouver Island.</p> <p>Mayor Bruce Harrell signed a new law doubling the per-night fee for each hotel room from two to four dollars.</p> <p>The money is used to market Seattle as a vacation destination.</p> <p>“There is a feeling right now. I’m going to call it a little bit of magic in the air,” Tom Norwalk of Visit Seattle said.</p> <p>Norwalk said hotel occupancy percentages plummeted to single digits early in the pandemic and rebounded to about 40 percent in 2021.</p> <p>Norwalk predicts about 60% of hotel rooms could be filled in 2022, still well below the 80% in 2019. “All of the fundamentals that were in place in this city in 2019 are still there and ready to grow again,” Norwalk said.</p> <p>This year’s Seattle-based Alaska cruise season begins April 11.</p> <p>Nearly 300 sailings are scheduled, and this summer at least one ship will be in port every day of the week.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Tourism rebounding, visitors safe?
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/seattle-tourism-is-rebounding-but-are-visitors-being-kept-safe
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — New numbers from tourism organization ‘Visit Seattle,’ show tourism is coming back after dropping off because of the pandemic.</p> <p>They add in 2021, 25 percent more visitors came to the city and King County than in 2020.</p> <p>However, as more people come back to visit, are they being kept safe from crime?</p> <p>Not too far from some of the city’s busiest attractions in Pike Place Market are troubled areas of the city, like 3rd and Pine, which Mayor Bruce Harrell’s administration has worked to clean up. Tourists that we spoke to on Thursday, told us they have heard about the recent crime in the city.</p> <p>"Yeah, we've read about it," one visitor said. "It's not unique to Seattle. We're from Chicago so we've got our own troubles."</p>

	<p>Those we talked to said they generally feel safe in Seattle. Those sentiments are reflected in the positive numbers from ‘Visit Seattle.’</p> <p>“We’re starting to see slow, measured growth from our pre-pandemic highs,” said Tom Norwalk, ‘Visit Seattle,’ President and CEO.</p> <p>Norwalk emphasized the messaging of visitor safety is extremely important as they try to keep the tourism numbers growing.</p> <p>"We are a relatively very safe city in the big measurements," Norwalk said. "That doesn't necessarily comfort a visitor that is walking the streets and feels uncomfortable, or that has a perception that we're not safe and that's a deterrent to making a decision to travel. What we've spent a lot of time doing is talking about the good news about what's happening in the city and an effort by the mayor and elected officials to really keep things moving in the right direction."</p> <p>Meanwhile, Seattle Police officials said they are aware of increased tourism activity and they are getting ready for it.</p> <p>The West Precinct is anticipating the start of increased activity in the downtown core due to cruise ships, Major League Baseball, Soccer, and summer tourism. Our emphasis is to address the violent crime in the downtown core area and to increase safety at that junction of transit, tourism, and the waterfront,” a Police Spokesperson told KOMO Thursday.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Spokane public schools’ assaults, threats
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/investigations/spokane-public-schools-police-reports/293-6ca375ad-8df3-4d18-8706-77d662a02ef3
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — Police reports that were reviewed by Spokane Police Chief Craig Meidl show that staff and administrators at Spokane Public Schools (SPS) have inconsistently responded to reports of threats, physical and sexual assaults on campus.</p> <p>The reports were obtained by KREM 2 Investigators through a public records request. The majority of reports obtained were not filed by SPS as a whole but were filed by individuals.</p> <p>The reports come as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is investigating the district for allegations of criminal activity in schools.</p> <p>According to documents, a physical education teacher at Ferris High School wanted to press charges against a student who threatened to kill her in January 2022.</p> <p>Another teacher who witnessed the incident said the student threatened to kill the P.E. teacher, called her an inappropriate name and said, “boom boom boom,” while “pointing his hand in her direction as if he’s holding a handgun.”</p> <p>In a letter to Meidl from Lt. Rich Meyer, he said the P.E. teacher wanted to press charges against the student, but said she could not do so until she checked with the SPS Director of Safety Randy Moore. The letter states that he was not available on the day of the incident and could not be reached for six days after.</p> <p>Meyer said officers on scene were under the impression that SPS is requiring teachers and staff to get permission from Moore before involving the police. KREM 2 learned in early March that the SPS school board and district amended campus safety documents that discourage teachers from reporting violence directly to the police.</p>

"I have a great concern with the school district doing this as incidents could escalate that will put students in great danger," Meyer wrote to Meidl.

According to the letter, Moore told Meyer that he did not know why the P.E. teacher felt that she needed permission "to be a victim of a crime," but added that he "recognizes the issues of mixed messaging from SPS."

While police say the January Ferris High School incident demonstrates staff's resistance to contact law enforcement, several reports reviewed by Meidl show administrators contacting law enforcement after reporting the incidents to school officials.

Multiple incidents of assault at Lewis and Clark High School were documented in the reports, including a student assaulting a special education teacher in October 2021. According to the report, the teacher filed a police report a month after the incident.

The report says the student, who operates at a second-grade level, suddenly started kicking and punching another staff member before turning his attention to the teacher. The teacher said the student began punching the back of his neck and head before he fell to the ground. The teacher did not touch the student.

The teacher went to the hospital for treatment and left school early. He then contacted the school to find out when he could come back, but documents say he was told he could not come back to work because he was under investigation.

In early November 2021, another incident occurred at Lewis and Clark High in which a student was punched by another student while leaving the school, causing him to fall, hit his head and be knocked unconscious.

Police were called to Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center more than 12 hours after the incident occurred. The student was being treated for injuries that required surgery, though the police report did not specify his injuries.

The report does not mention whether staff alerted police to the incident.

In another incident at Glover Middle School, the assistant principal called police in April 2021 after she learned an eighth-grade student was having a sexual relationship with an 18-year-old man.

The assistant principal told officers that the girl is "very anti-police and would refuse to communicate any of this information with uniformed officers." Responding officers decided not to question the girl or her family further to ensure they would not escalate the situation, according to the report.

SPS planned to hold a news conference on Thursday to discuss its safety policy but canceled the meeting on Wednesday afternoon. The district instead sent an email detailing the campus safety model and said they were unable to comment.

"Although we are happy to talk about our safety model, its history, and the current positive impact on students and families, we are unable to answer any question that could be perceived as relating to the current FBI review," SPS said in a statement.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Report: military must avoid civilian deaths
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/report-us-military-must-do-more-to-avoid-civilian-deaths/
GIST	WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military needs to adjust its planning, training, targeting and use of weapons in order to better avoid widespread civilian deaths and damage such as the devastating 2017 battle to liberate the Syrian city of Raqqa from Islamic State militants, a new RAND report said Thursday.

The report requested by the Pentagon reflects criticism of the military's airstrike campaign that, according to some estimates, killed more than 1,600 civilians in Raqqa, as the U.S.-led coalition worked to destroy the Islamic State caliphate that wrested control of large swaths of Iraq and Syria.

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said the report, which lays out a series of recommendations to improve military procedures and strategy, will be used as the department develops its own broader plan to reduce civilian harm.

"No other military works as hard as we do to mitigate civilian harm, and yet we still cause it," said Kirby. "We're going to continue to try to learn from past issues."

RAND concluded that the battle for Raqqa provided important lessons.

Michael McNerney, lead author of the RAND report, called Raqqa "a cautionary tale about civilian harm in urban combat." He said it "should serve as an extra incentive to the DoD to strengthen its policies and procedures to mitigate, document and respond to civilian harm."

The RAND report noted that there has been a wide range of estimated civilian casualties during the siege, but also said it believes that 60%-80% of Raqqa was left uninhabitable by the time the city was liberated in October 2017.

Initially the U.S.-led coalition estimated that it was responsible for 38 incidents involving 240 civilian casualties — including 178 who were killed. A consortium of local Syrian and international groups, including Amnesty International and Airwars, put the number of casualties at a "high estimate" of 1,600, but said that about 774 of them could specifically be "verified" by data as the result of coalition action.

The report makes it clear that several thousand more civilians likely died, based on the number of bodies uncovered by U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, but many were probably killed by IS or other fighters on the ground.

"Our report focuses on U.S. actions in Raqqa, but the actions of the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian partners undoubtedly contributed far more to civilian harm and suffering in Syria overall," McNerney said.

The report noted that the challenges in Raqqa were compounded by limits on the number U.S. troops that could be there, as well as where they could be positioned. U.S. troops on the ground could have provided better targeting and civilian information, including on Islamic State militants' efforts to use civilians as human shields, the report said.

RAND recommended that the U.S. military provide more extensive training and guidance on the need to avoid civilian harm, and plan and execute operations in ways to achieve those goals. Changes could include improved planning, better assessments of potential collateral damage, increased mission rehearsals, improved intelligence gathering, and more selective use of air strikes and munitions that minimize bomb fragmentation.

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HEADLINE	03/31 SKorea eases some pandemic restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/south-korea-eases-distancing-amid-slowng-omicron-spread/
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea will ease some of its pandemic restrictions starting next week as officials express cautious hope the worst of its omicron outbreak has passed.</p> <p>The limit on private social gatherings will be raised from eight to 10 people starting Monday, while restaurants, bars and other indoor spaces can stay open an hour later, until midnight, Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum said Friday.</p>

Officials said most social distancing restrictions could be removed, except for an indoor mask mandate, if the outbreak further slows and the medical response remains stable over the next two weeks.

Kim's announcement from a government anti-virus meeting came after the country reported a daily average of 316,000 new coronavirus cases in the past seven days, a modest decrease from the average of 357,800 a week before. The one-day record was 621,187 on March 17.

While Kim said the country has likely passed the peak of infections, there's still worry about the pressure on hospitals, given the week or longer intervals between infections, hospitalizations and deaths. Officials also say the highly transmissible omicron subvariant called BA.2 is slowing the decline in overall infections.

"Fortunately, the outbreak has slowed for the second consecutive week," Kim said. "But there's persisting concern about an increase in serious cases and deaths that might come after time lags, the spread of 'stealth omicron,' or BA.2, which has become the dominant strain, and an expected increase in travel during spring weather."

The country has averaged 328 deaths in the past week, including 360 in the latest 24 hours, while around 1,300 virus patients were in serious or critical condition. More than 64% of South Korea's 2,800 intensive care units designated for COVID-19 treatment were occupied.

Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol said social distancing measures have clearly become less effective because omicron is much more contagious than previous variants of the virus.

"Even if we ease social distancing, the increase in infections is expected to be only around 10 to 20%," he said during a briefing.

Quarantine requirements for close contacts, hospitalization for mild cases and proof of vaccination or negative tests when entering public spaces were some of the measures eased or lifted earlier.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Seattle: nationwide police chief search
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-mayor-announces-nationwide-police-chief-search-urges-interim-chief-diaz-to-apply/
GIST	<p>Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell will begin the search for a permanent police chief in April, but is still content with the leadership of interim Chief Adrian Diaz, according to Thursday announcement.</p> <p>Harrell announced that he will begin the search for a permanent police chief to replace former Chief Carmen Best, who left at the end of 2020 after protests against police brutality, criticism and budget cuts. For the 17 months since then, Diaz, who joined the department in 1997, has served as interim chief.</p> <p>And Harrell, whose first three months in office have centered on crime statistics and efforts to intervene, has been pleased with Diaz so far.</p> <p>"As we work to make immediate and long-term safety improvements at 12th and Jackson, 3rd Avenue, and neighborhoods citywide, I have been pleased with Interim Chief Diaz's approach and commitment to progress on public safety," Harrell said in the announcement. "Although I expect to conduct a robust search process, I encourage Interim Chief Diaz to apply."</p> <p>During his inaugural address in January, Harrell committed to "making some decisions" about the chief position in the first quarter of the year, and suggested he wanted to give Diaz time to perform.</p> <p>"I believe I have to give everyone an opportunity to show some brilliance, show some talent," Harrell said in January.</p>

	<p>“He does not know what it looks like to work for a mayor like me, and I have to give him that opportunity.”</p> <p>However, the city’s charter requires the mayor to conduct a search and name three finalists for the chief position. The selected finalist must then be approved by the City Council.</p> <p>Harrell said Thursday he will hire a third-party firm to lead a nationwide search for candidates and appoint residents to a search committee for the position in April. The mayor’s office will also launch a website “providing an overview of the search process” and collecting public feedback on the search, according to the release.</p> <p>According to a department spokesperson, Diaz is out of town at a conference and was not available for comment on Thursday.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Boeing uses a Velcro patch on plane glitch
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/boeing-gets-out-the-velcro-to-patch-over-another-glitch-with-the-air-force-tanker/
GIST	<p>Boeing this month discovered the latest in a long line of glitches on its KC-46 aircraft: Some trim hanging down above the over-wing emergency exit doors prevents them from opening.</p> <p>Though the KC-46 is designed as a troop transport as well as an air-to-air refueling aircraft, Boeing somehow missed this basic exit flaw in the tanker’s emergency egress system.</p> <p>Every commercial airplane Boeing designs, including the 767 that is the basic airframe for the KC-46, is tested during certification to make sure all passengers can evacuate in an emergency within 90 seconds.</p> <p>For this defect-plagued military variant, which entered service in 2019, no such test was run.</p> <p>“We are carefully examining our processes to determine why this issue was not identified sooner,” said Boeing in response to Seattle Times questions.</p> <p>The timing of the discovery is awkward.</p> <p>At a media roundtable last Friday, Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall told reporters that the Pentagon will likely not allow Airbus to compete for the next tranche of Air Force tankers, as had been expected, but will instead opt to stay with Boeing and ask only for “a modified KC-46.”</p> <p>Fixed with Velcro</p> <p>The newly discovered door trim problem affects all KC-46 tankers previously delivered, including the 57 already being flown by the U.S. Air Force and the two tankers in service with the Japanese military.</p> <p>Boeing will have to retrofit all those tankers once it comes up with a permanent fix.</p> <p>In the meantime, Boeing released a service bulletin to the Air Force with instructions to unscrew the piece of trim that interferes with the doors and attach it with Velcro instead.</p> <p>Boeing said this provides “a temporary solution to ensure continued safe operation of the aircraft.”</p> <p>In a statement acknowledging the problem, the Air Force said, “This change removes the associated emergency risk until a permanent modification can be made.”</p> <p>Boeing said it identified the problem on March 17 “and immediately notified the Air Force.” The service letter with the temporary Velcro fix was issued on March 21.</p>

The KC-46 is primarily an air-to-air refueling tanker. For that mission, it has only a flight crew aboard and they have their own emergency exit doors in the forward section of the aircraft.

However, the plane can also be configured in the rear cargo cabin for an aeromedical mission carrying injured personnel or with passenger seats installed as a troop transport.

“There have been missions with passenger or aeromedical configuration,” Boeing said.

The exits over the wing are there to help quickly evacuate from this area of the plane. The Air Force statement said the door trim problem could “hinder egress during an emergency.”

It wouldn’t entirely prevent passengers exiting because there is one other pair of emergency exit doors in the aft area not affected by the door trim obstruction.

Boeing said no event has arisen in service that would have tested the over-wing exit doors.

“In the more than 7,000 sorties the KC-46 has flown there have been no emergencies requiring use of the over-wing emergency door,” Boeing said.

Series of tanker problems

The company said it doesn’t yet have a cost estimate for developing the fix and retrofitting the tanker fleet.

The military has not characterized the door trim issue as a serious deficiency, as it has for multiple previous design and manufacturing problems that have plagued the tanker program and for which costs have mounted.

Boeing has since 2014 written off a total of \$5.4 billion on the tanker.

In 2019, Boeing was forced to ground the KC-46s it was then flight testing after the Air Force expressed concern about loose tools and other debris found inside the completed airplanes.

The most serious outstanding problem is with the remote vision system used to operate the plane’s refueling boom. That requires a complete redesign, a project expected to take several years.

Airbus, in partnership with Lockheed Martin, had hoped to take advantage of Boeing’s troubles and offer its A330-based tanker for the Pentagon’s pending second big tanker contract.

And yet last week, Air Force Secretary Kendall indicated Airbus may not even get the chance to compete for that contract.

“As we ... look further out, the requirements start to look like a modified KC-46 more than they do a completely new design,” Kendall told reporters. “I think there’s still a possibility of a competition out there, but as we’ve looked at our requirements, the likelihood of a competition will come down.”

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HEADLINE	03/31 Rising wages complicate inflation cooling?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/business/economy/inflation-rising-wages.html
GIST	<p>Economists have been waiting for Americans to shift from buying goods, like furniture and appliances, toward spending on vacations, restaurant meals and other services as the pandemic fades, betting the transition would take pressure off supply chains and help inflation to moderate.</p> <p>Rapid wage growth could make that story more complicated. Demand for services is rising just as many employers are struggling to find workers, which could force them to continue raising wages. While</p>

positive for workers, that could keep overall inflation brisk as companies try to cover their labor costs, speeding up price increases for services even as they begin to moderate for goods.

Heavy spending on goods during the pandemic has been a driver of the recent inflation burst. Consumers began snapping up physical products a few months after pandemic lockdowns began and have kept on buying. Spending on services also has recovered, but much more slowly. That shift in what people are purchasing has roiled supply chains, which were not built to produce, ship and deliver so many cars, treadmills and washing machines.

Policymakers spent months betting that as the virus waned and consumers resumed more normal shopping patterns, prices of goods would slow their ascent or even fall. That would pull down inflation, which has been running at its fastest pace in 40 years.

But that transition — assuming it happens — may do less to cool inflation than many had hoped. A big chunk of what the government defines as “services” inflation comes from rental housing costs, which often move up alongside wage growth, as households can afford more and bid up the cost of a limited supply of housing units. And when it comes to discretionary services, like salons and gyms, labor is a major cost of production. Rising pay likely means higher prices.

Jason Furman, a Harvard economist who served as a top adviser to President Barack Obama, said the shortage of workers in many service industries means that if demand for services goes up, prices will too. That means a shift in spending back to services will not necessarily result in an overall slowdown in the pace of price increases.

“An awful lot of services are incredibly constrained,” he said. “As we shift back to services, we’ll get more services inflation and less goods inflation, and I don’t think it’s at all obvious that the result of that is less inflation.”

Inflation is running at the fastest pace since 1982, data released Thursday confirmed. Prices climbed 6.4% in the year through February, more than three times the Federal Reserve’s goal of 2% annual increases on average.

Rapid price changes have been spreading beyond goods and into services in recent months. While America has gotten used to thinking about shortages in products — couches are out of stock, shoes are back-ordered — labor shortfalls could mean that services will also end up oversubscribed, allowing providers to charge more.

MaidPro, a home-cleaning firm, has seen a surge in demand from professionals who are spending more time at home. But it is having trouble finding workers to keep up, said Tom Manchester, the company’s president.

“Our demand right now outstrips our supply of being able to service that demand,” he said. “Demand has just continued to be strong — like double-digit strong. And if we could find qualified pros to meet the demand, we’d be even more ahead than we are today.”

Some economists argue that if goods inflation slows, that could still help price gains overall to moderate, even amid rising wages. Prices for products that last a long time rose 11.4% in the year through February — posting the first slight moderation in months, from 11.6% in January. Prices for shorter-lived products like cosmetics and clothing continued to accelerate on an annual basis, climbing 8.6%. Both are still much stronger than services inflation.

“We have in mind a big decline in goods prices,” said Roberto Perli, head of global policy research at the investment bank Piper Sandler. “It would take a lot of increase in service prices to actually offset that.”

Outright declines in goods prices are not guaranteed. Take cars: Rapid price growth in new and used autos was a big driver of inflation last year, and many economists expect those prices to dip in 2022. But

Jonathan Smoke, chief economist at Cox Automotive, said continued shortages mean prices for new cars are likely to continue rising, and issues with new car supply could spill over to blunt the expected decline in used car costs.

And services inflation is now also coming in fast. It ran at 4.6% in the year through February, the quickest pace since 1991. If sustained, that is enough to keep inflation above the Federal Reserve's 2% goal even if product prices stop accelerating.

While goods have taken up a bigger chunk of household budgets in recent months than they did before the pandemic, Americans still spend nearly twice as much on services as on goods overall.

"You don't need a lot of extra services inflation to make up for your lost goods inflation," Furman said.

Restaurants, hotels and other discretionary services are not the only places where persistent demand could run up against limited supply, Furman argued. Many nonurgent health care services saw a decline in demand during the pandemic and are now experiencing a rebound amid a shortage of nurses and other skilled workers.

Rent — which is the biggest monthly expense for many families and plays a big role in determining inflation overall — has also been rising at a rapid clip. In cities such as Tampa, Florida; Spokane; and Knoxville, Tennessee, listed rents were up 30% or more in the fall from a year earlier, according to data from Apartment List.

Igor Popov, chief economist at Apartment List, said the breakneck pace of new rent increases is unlikely to repeat itself this year. But many rents will be resetting at higher market rates this spring and summer, he said, adding that they were likely to continue rising as long as wages did the same.

"Rents are partially a function of what people are able and willing to pay," Popov said.

The Fed's recent move to raise interest rates — and its planned increases throughout the year — may cool off the housing market, which could eventually affect rents. But in the near term, higher interest rates might make purchasing homes expensive and out of reach for more people. That could temporarily increase rental demand.

Much hinges on what happens next with wages, and that is anyone's guess.

Laura Rosner-Warburton, an economist at MacroPolicy Perspectives, said wages might be going through something of a "level reset," where companies have been paying up in light of a newly tight labor market — in some cases, to get on par with wages at Amazon or other big companies — but may not continue to lift pay so much month after month.

That may be what happened in accommodation and restaurants, she said, noting that both saw a surge in wage pressures that has since cooled off.

Nick Bunker, director of economic research for North America at the Indeed Hiring Lab, said conditions remain tight — there are 1.8 job openings for every active job seeker today — but the data suggest that labor shortages are no longer actively worsening, which could at least keep wage growth from accelerating further.

"The labor market is stronger, tighter, hotter than it was before the pandemic, but there are some signs that it is starting to level off," he said.

It is also possible that higher wages will lure workers back into the job market, helping to offset labor shortages and allowing conditions to settle into a more sustainable path.

	<p>But the economy has repeatedly surprised economists and businesses over the past year — typically in ways that have stoked pay and inflation.</p> <p>Manchester said many maid service executives expected the labor crunch to ease when enhanced unemployment benefits from the federal government ended in September. But while there was some increase in willing workers, there was no sudden flood.</p> <p>“Everyone is competing for hourly employees,” he said. “We’re competing with the Dunkin’ Donuts, the Home Depots, the Bed Bath & Beyonds — anyone that relies on hourly workers.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Companies leave Russia, but some remain
SOURCE	https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/almost-500-companies-have-withdrawn-russia-some-remain
GIST	<p>Since the invasion of Ukraine began, almost 500 companies have announced their withdrawal from Russia—but some companies have continued to operate in Russia undeterred.</p> <p>Originally conceptualized as a simple "withdraw" vs. "remain" list, our new list of companies now consists of five categories, each assigned a letter grade of A-F.</p> <p>The list below is updated continuously by Jeffrey Sonnenfeld and his team of experts, research fellows, and students at the Yale Chief Executive Leadership Institute to reflect new announcements from companies in as close to real time as possible. Our data is compiled using both public sources such as government regulatory filings, company statements, financial analyst reports, Bloomberg, FactSet, S&P Capital IQ, and Thomson Reuters, as well as non-public sources including a vast network of company insiders, whistleblowers and executive contacts, in addition to Russian-language sources.</p> <p>Our list has already garnered extensive coverage for its role in helping catalyze the mass corporate exodus from Russia.</p> <p>When this list was first published the week of February 28, only several dozen companies had announced their departure.</p> <p>Hundreds of companies have withdrawn in the days since, and we are humbled that our list helped galvanize millions around the world to raise awareness and take action.</p>
Return to Top	<i>Click on source link to view companies that have announced withdrawal from Russia as well as companies that continue to remain operational in Russia</i>

HEADLINE	03/31 Taiwan to study Ukraine war tactics
SOURCE	https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3172582/taiwan-appoints-working-group-study-ukraine-war-tactics-against
GIST	<p>Taiwan’s defence ministry has set up a working group to study the tactics of the war in Ukraine, including how the country has been able to hold out against Russia, and has been discussing this with the United States, its defence minister said on Thursday.</p> <p>Taiwan, which is claimed by Beijing as its own territory, has raised its alert level since the Russian invasion, wary of Beijing possibly making a similar move on the island – although it has reported no signs this is about to happen.</p> <p>The possible impact of the war on mainland China’s military thinking on Taiwan, and how Beijing could attack the island, have been widely debated in official circles in Taipei.</p> <p>Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of parliament, Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng said they had had “contact” with governments abroad to talk about how the war was being fought, and had set up their own working group to study it.</p>

	<p>Taiwan was following topics including Russia's poor military performance and Ukraine's resistance, he said.</p> <p>"It is not only discussed in exchange meetings between the United States and Taiwan, but also discussed with other countries that have regular contacts with Taiwan," Chiu added, without giving details.</p> <p>Taiwan's team studying Ukraine included academics from the National Defence University, he said. "However, we will not make remarks rashly, but through internal discussions which are important, to get results that are helpful for building armaments and preparing for war."</p> <p>While Taiwanese officials have seen many parallels in the Ukraine war and their own situation, including having a giant neighbour with territorial ambitions, they have also pointed to major differences.</p> <p>Taiwan has talked, for example, of the "natural barrier" of the Taiwan Strait which would make putting mainland troops on the ground much more difficult than Russia crossing its land border with Ukraine.</p> <p>Taiwan also has a large and well-equipped air force, and is developing its own missile-strike capability. Beijing has been stepping up its military pressure against Taiwan for around the past two years.</p> <p>Taiwan rejects Beijing's sovereignty claims, and says only the island's people can decide their future.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Seattle: \$100K+ households predominate
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/100k-plus-households-are-now-the-majority-in-most-seattle-neighborhoods/
GIST	<p>A six-figure income is still out of reach for most Americans — less than one-third of U.S. households take home \$100,000 or more in a year.</p> <p>Seattle, of course, isn't like most of America.</p> <p>Census data released in March shows the Emerald City hit a milestone of affluence in 2020: In more than half of the city's census tracts, the majority of households have an income of at least \$100,000. (There are 177 census tracts in Seattle, and 93 of them — that's 53% — met that income threshold).</p> <p>It's the first time that's happened. In the 2019 data release, six-figure-income households were the majority in 48% of the city's tracts.</p> <p>As you'd expect, many of the city's high-income tracts hug the waterfront, running along Puget Sound or Lake Washington. North and Central Seattle also have a number of inland tracts where the majority of households make \$100,000 or more.</p> <p>One neighborhood stands out for the dominance of six-figure incomes households. In North Seattle's Laurelhurst, 91% of households earn more than \$100,000, making it the neighborhood most skewed toward higher incomes.</p> <p>The Madrona/Denny-Blaine and Montlake neighborhoods, both in Central Seattle, tie for second, with around 79% of households in the six-figure income tier.</p> <p>These neighborhoods, like most of those in the top tier for income, are residential areas that largely consist of owner-occupied single-family homes. But in the past decade, many of Seattle's more urban neighborhoods have also grown tremendously in affluence.</p>

In fact, three of the neighborhoods in the top-10 for income are in Central Seattle, and made up primarily of apartment and condo dwellers. These include the Westlake neighborhood, the Belltown waterfront, and the western half of South Lake Union. In all three areas, more than 70% of households have incomes of \$100,000 or more.

The 84 Seattle census tracts in which most households make less than \$100,000 are spread across the city, but they are most concentrated in Rainier Valley and the interior of West Seattle.

Most of these 84 tracts have a mix of lower, middle and upper-income households. But there are a small number that skew heavily toward the lower end of the income spectrum.

In a dozen Seattle tracts, the majority of households earn less than \$50,000. Most of these are clustered around the University of Washington in North Seattle. College students make up a large percentage of the population here, which explains the lower incomes.

The rest of the tracts where most households earn less than \$50,000 are located in a few city neighborhoods. These include the northernmost section of Bitter Lake and part of Northgate; the Chinatown International District and Yesler Terrace; and a section of Beacon Hill that includes NewHolly, a large mixed-income community.

While there are only a handful of neighborhoods where the majority of households earn less than \$50,000, Seattle has an even rarer income bracket: Households that earn between \$50,000 and \$99,000.

This is what most of America would probably call middle income, but in Seattle, there isn't a single census tract where households in this income tier are in the majority. The neighborhood that comes closest is Interbay, which lies between Queen Anne and Magnolia in Central Seattle. Forty-seven percent of households here earn between \$50,000 and \$99,000.

Citywide, slightly less than one-quarter of Seattle households earn between \$50,000 and \$99,000, and about 27% earn less than \$50,000. Nearly half (49%) make \$100,000 or more.

However, here's something to consider about the census data. These income figures are calculated by taking an average of five years worth of data — in other words, the 2020 release is actually an average of the data from 2016 to 2020. The Census Bureau uses five-year averages to increase the sample size, which improves the accuracy of data for relatively small areas like census tracts.

But it also means that the figures are a little out of date, even though they were just released. Most likely, incomes in Seattle in 2022 are even higher than these numbers show.

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HEADLINE	03/31 More gender-neutral airport screening
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/us-airport-security-screening-to-become-more-gender-neutral/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. airport security procedures will become more gender-neutral, with changes to scanners used for screening and the use of an “X” for travelers going through Precheck who do not identify as male or female, the Biden administration said Thursday.</p> <p>Transportation Security Administration officers will also receive new instructions on screening intended to make procedures less invasive, the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement.</p> <p>They are among a series of travel-security measures announced by the department in conjunction with Transgender Day of Visibility. President Joe Biden is marking the day by advocating against what his administration terms “dangerous anti-transgender legislative attacks” that have passed in statehouses across the country.</p>

	<p>“DHS is committed to protecting the traveling public while ensuring that everyone, regardless of gender identity, is treated with respect,” Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in the statement.</p> <p>The use of the “X” pronoun in the TSA Precheck advanced security program will begin April 11 and is intended to keep pace with identity documents that already include that option, DHS said. A new “X” gender marker on U.S. passport applications also begins April 11.</p> <p>Later this year, TSA will begin using scanners with new technology that will replace gender-based systems and are intended to “advance civil rights and improve the customer experience.”</p> <p>The TSA will work with airlines to promote the acceptance of the “X” gender marker and will also update the guidance for airport security screening officers to remove gender considerations when validating documents, DHS said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 UK intel: Russia troops disobey orders
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-europe-australia-canberra-3d72fb96191029659575e4b368b80bd1
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Demoralized Russian soldiers in Ukraine were refusing to carry out orders and sabotaging their own equipment and had accidentally shot down their own aircraft, a U.K. intelligence chief said on Thursday.</p> <p>Jeremy Fleming, who heads the GCHQ electronic spy agency, made the remarks at a speech in the Australian capital Canberra.</p> <p>Russian President Vladimir Putin had apparently “massively misjudged” the invasion, he said.</p> <p>“It’s clear he misjudged the resistance of the Ukrainian people. He underestimated the strength of the coalition his actions would galvanize. He underplayed the economic consequences of the sanctions regime, and he overestimated the abilities of his military to secure a rapid victory,” Fleming said.</p> <p>“We’ve seen Russian soldiers, short of weapons and morale, refusing to carry out orders, sabotaging their own equipment and even accidentally shooting down their own aircraft,” Fleming added.</p> <p>Although Putin’s advisers were believed to be too afraid to tell the truth, the “extent of these misjudgments must be crystal clear to the regime,” he said.</p> <p>Fleming warned that the Kremlin was hunting for cyber targets and bringing in mercenaries to shore up its stalled military campaign in Ukraine.</p> <p>He praised Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s “information operation” for being highly effective at countering Russia’s massive disinformation drive spreading propaganda about the war.</p> <p>While there were expectations that Russia would launch a major cyberattack as part of its military campaign, Fleming said such a move was never a central part of Moscow’s standard playbook for war.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Key inflation gauge hits 40yr-high
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/business-prices-inflation-c9d81525f808b25ecd37e5c91d6bb0e5
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — An inflation gauge that is closely monitored by the Federal Reserve jumped 6.4% in February compared with a year ago, with sharply higher prices for food, gasoline and other necessities squeezing Americans’ finances.</p>

The figure reported Thursday by the Commerce Department was the largest year-over-year rise since January 1982. Excluding volatile prices for food and energy, so-called core inflation increased 5.4% in February from 12 months earlier.

Robust consumer demand has combined with shortages of many goods to fuel the sharpest price jumps in four decades. Measures of inflation will likely worsen in the coming months because Thursday's report doesn't reflect the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which occurred Feb. 24. The war has disrupted global oil markets and accelerated prices for wheat, nickel and other key commodities.

Squeezed by inflation, consumers increased their spending by just 0.2% in February, down from a much larger 2.7% gain in January. Adjusted for inflation, spending actually fell 0.4% last month. The decline partly reflected a shift away from heavy spending on goods to a focus on services, such as health care, travel and entertainment, which consumers had long avoided during the worst of the pandemic.

Spending on such services grew 0.6%, the most since July, while purchases of autos, furniture, clothes and other goods dropped 2.1%. Many economists had previously suggested that a shift away from goods purchases might loosen supply chain snarls and cool inflation. But prices are still rising rapidly for goods, including a 1.1% increase in February.

Americans' overall incomes rose 0.5% in February, the highest gain since November and up from just 0.1% in January. Wages and salaries jumped 0.8%, the most in four months.

Businesses have been raising pay to attract and keep employees — a trend that is benefiting workers but also giving employers cause to raise prices to offset their higher labor costs. That cycle is helping fuel inflation.

Last month, food costs climbed 1.4%, the most in nearly two years. Energy costs spiked 3.7%, the biggest such increase since October.

The Federal Reserve responded this month to the inflation surge by raising its benchmark short-term interest rate by a quarter-point from near zero, and it's likely to keep raising it well into next year. Because its rate affects many consumer and business loans, the Fed's rate hikes will make borrowing more expensive and could weaken the economy over time.

Michael Feroli of JPMorgan is among economists who now think the Fed will raise its key rate by an aggressive half-point in both May and June. The central bank hasn't raised its benchmark rate by a half-point in two decades, a sign of how concerned it has become about the persistent surge in inflation.

On a monthly basis, prices rose 0.6% from January to February, up slightly from the previous month's increase of 0.5% and matching the highest monthly figure since 2008. Core prices rose 0.4%, down from a 0.5% increase in January.

Gas prices have soared in the past month in the aftermath of Russia's invasion, which led the United Kingdom and the Biden administration to ban Russia's oil exports. The cost of a gallon of gas shot up to a national average of \$4.24 a gallon Wednesday, according to AAA. That's up 63 cents from a month ago, when it was \$3.61.

Michael Pearce, an economist at Capital Economics, estimated that the gas price spike will cost Americans an annualized \$100 billion in March.

Americans will likely dig into their savings to cover the higher gas costs in the near term, he said. "But if higher gasoline prices are sustained, that will eventually weigh on spending in other areas."

On Thursday, President Joe Biden is expected to order the release of up to 1 million barrels of oil a day from the nation's strategic petroleum reserve in an effort to reduce gas prices.

	<p>Thursday's report follows a more widely monitored inflation gauge, the consumer price index, that was issued earlier this month. The CPI jumped to 7.9% in February from a year ago, the sharpest such increase in four decades.</p> <p>Many economists still expect inflation to peak in the coming months. In part, that's because price spikes that occurred last year, when the economy widely reopened, will begin to make the year-over-year price increases appear smaller. Yet Fed officials project that inflation, as measured by its preferred gauge, will still be a comparatively high 4.3% by the end of this year.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Ukraine on edge: fear of saboteurs
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/ukraine-spies-saboteurs.html
GIST	<p>LVIV, Ukraine — Two weeks after Valeriy, an actor and amateur photographer, settled in western Ukraine after fleeing his home in Kyiv, he was stopped and questioned by the local police.</p> <p>Someone had reported him as he strolled around the city photographing its squares, churches and other landmarks — many now buttressed with sandbags.</p> <p>The police officers took him to their car and scrolled through the recent photos on his mobile phone, leafed through his sketchbook, and checked what channels he subscribed to on the social messaging app Telegram.</p> <p>“They were even reading my memes to check if I am making fun of us or them,” he said in an interview, meaning Ukrainians or Russians. Luckily for him, the officers found a meme of ragtag Russian soldiers with televisions for heads — an allusion to the intense propaganda Moscow is churning out — and let him go.</p> <p>Valeriy, 32, who asked that his full name not be used for fear of recriminations, is not alone in having to look over his shoulder. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine now into its second month, suspicion has settled like a fog over the country, joining anger and unity as the dominant emotions.</p> <p>Ukrainians have been shaken by reports of “dyversanti” — saboteurs and diversionary groups working for Russia who mix into the civilian population, sow confusion and mistrust, and possibly even alert the enemy to potential targets. Civilians who were already living in fear are seeing spies everywhere.</p> <p>“With this level of anxiety, and trying to find sources of danger, the more you imagine things when you don't know what the beast looks like,” Valeriy said.</p> <p>Suspensions run particularly high in Lviv, near the Polish border. Because it has been largely spared the destruction and horror of cities further east, it has become a magnet for Ukrainians seeking safety, as well as a transit point for those headed to Poland. As such, its population has grown temporarily by up to 400,000, local officials say.</p> <p>That has put a lot of unfamiliar faces on Lviv's streets, and raised the antennae of those who live there permanently.</p> <p>In the first weeks of the war, the police and administrators fielded more than 17,000 calls a day about supposedly suspicious activity, Lviv's regional governor, Maksym Kozytsky, said in an interview. Now law enforcement bodies are fielding about 10 percent of that volume, he said. But that's still more than 1,000 a day.</p> <p>Police officers and members of the Territorial Defense, a volunteer unit of the Ukrainian army, patrol the streets of Lviv and check cars at roundabouts. Men serve at checkpoints on the entrance to every city or village nearby, reserving the right to check documents.</p>

Lviv's Neo-renaissance opera house functioned throughout the two world wars, its director said. But now, it is not staging operas publicly because of fears that saboteurs may attempt a provocation, its director, Vasyl Vovkun, said in an interview. Instead, the theater has focused on filming and publishing performances, like a recent short ballet about Ukraine's plea to impose a no-fly zone over the country.

There are legitimate reasons for suspicion. During the first month of the war, Ukraine's intelligence agency, the S.B.U., dismantled 20 saboteur groups and apprehended 350 more saboteurs, a spokesman, Artem Dekhtiarenko, said last week.

And Mr. Kozytsky wrote on his Telegram channel that on Saturday, a day when Russian missiles struck two industrial facilities in Lviv, the police had stopped a suspicious car and checked the phones of the two men inside. He said they found videos and photos showing the movements of Ukrainian military. "They also had photos of the passports of men with Luhansk registration and many contacts with Russian numbers," he said.

Ukrainians of all stripes have tried to help the authorities in any way they can. Patriotic, militaristic music blares from the speakers of every restaurant and cafe. The Italian protest song "Bella Ciao" has been recast in Ukrainian with lyrics celebrating the donated American-made Javelin missiles and Turkish Bayraktar drones being used by the troops.

And ordinary civilians can join the fight by reporting suspicious activities. An app, eVorog, a wordplay that means "there is an enemy," asks people to report any suspected military activity. It has received more than 200,000 submissions in a month, according to the Patrol Police, a subdivision of the police responsible for public order.

With the war at the forefront of everyone's minds, people are nervous, especially newcomers. Anton Ivanov, a 36-year-old IT specialist from Kyiv who settled in his uncle's Lviv apartment, was visited by the police and the Territorial Defense. Surprised that anyone would show up at his door, he asked the men knocking who they were.

The armed, uniformed men were asking the same question.

"They demanded our IDs, wanted to see who we are, where we are going, and why we are staying here," Mr. Ivanov said. "They asked if we were hiding someone."

It turned out that the neighbors in their leafy residential neighborhood had become suspicious about a car with license plates not from Lviv, and someone phoned the police. Once the documents had been checked, they moved on.

In another cobblestone neighborhood, Natalia Kovtun, 71, has been refusing to open the basement bomb shelter in her apartment building out of fear that a nefarious actor could plant a bomb there.

"What if someone tries to break into here, and bring a bomb here?" she asked one of her neighbors. "Do you understand what will happen? We will all fly up, the entire house. We have really unprotected doors and it is easy to break the lock to come into our yard."

In the nearby Ternopil region, two groups of men grew so suspicious that they reported each other to the police.

"There was a conflict situation between unknown citizens who considered each other dyversanti," the Ternopil police wrote on Facebook on March 18. One group followed and then reported several men who appeared suspicious to them; the other group also called the police to report that they were being chased and felt threatened by "an unknown aggressive man."

"We warn citizens: Do not try to detain unknown persons on their own, or threaten them with weapons or physical confrontation," the regional police wrote.

The perception is that while Russian forces cannot send their armies to surround Lviv, the enemies — individuals and small groups who can blend in with the other hundreds of thousands of outsiders — are already within.

A law enforcement official, who declined to be identified because of the tense atmosphere in the city, pointed out that Ukraine and Russia have been fighting for eight years in the East. He shared stories of recent apprehensions of saboteurs posing as humanitarian workers. “Of course they have had time to carefully prepare,” he said.

A 10 p.m. curfew is in effect, though the streets are mostly empty by nightfall. Mysterious messages get passed around warning that the Russians plan to target representatives of western embassies or aid agencies that have moved from Kyiv.

Previous attacks in the West were also supported by local assets.

An amateur aviator from Lutsk, northeast of Lviv, where the military airport was hit twice, had been providing information to Russian security services since at least 2017, the S.B.U. found after detaining the man earlier this month. They accused him of communicating with the Russians about the activities of the military during the first week of the war.

“People are enraged,” the mayor of Lutsk, Ihor Polishchuk, said in a recent interview. “The person who was detained had posed as a civic activist,” he said, adding that the man’s arrest had “increased the level of suspicion of possible spies.”

The S.B.U. reported similar instances of assistance in attacks on the military airports in the cities of Ivano-Frankivsk and Vinnytsia.

The trepidation in Lviv has only grown since the missile strikes on the city on Saturday.

Lviv’s regional administration and Ukraine’s intelligence agency have resisted providing full details about targets, and have lashed out at journalists for showing images of the aftermath of the strikes, saying these give the Russian forces information that helps them decide whether or not to launch more projectiles.

Valeriy, the actor and photographer, said that his encounter with the police was an invasion of privacy he would not have tolerated in peacetime, but that it was conducted in an “appropriate manner” and for a good cause.

“There is a fine line between paranoia and vigilance,” he said.

“At the end of the day, if it’s the former, it’s just inconvenient for an innocent person. If not — then someone dies.”

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HEADLINE	04/01 Sri Lanka: dozens arrests following protests
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/dozens-arrested-sri-lanka-protests-economy-83805352
GIST	<p>COLOMBO, Sri Lanka -- Dozens of people were arrested in Sri Lanka following protests near the president's home demanding that he resign amid the country's worst economic crisis in memory, police said Friday.</p> <p>President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's office blamed “organized extremists” within the group of protesters for violence during Thursday night's demonstration, where police fired tear gas and a water cannon at thousands of protesters and arrested 54 people.</p>

Nuwan Bopage, an attorney representing some of the suspects, said several of them were being taken for medical examinations for various injuries and would likely appear in court later Friday.

The protesters blame Rajapaksa for long power outages and shortages of essentials. A police curfew that had been implemented in the suburbs of the capital was lifted Friday morning.

On Thursday, the crowds demonstrating along the roads leading to Rajapaksa's private residence on the outskirts of Colombo stoned two army buses that police were using to block the protesters from entering the road leading to the president's house. They set fire to one of the buses and turned back a fire truck that rushed to douse it.

At least one person was severely injured in the leg when police fired tear gas cannisters directly at protesters to stop their attack on the bus.

Several burned vehicles could be seen at the scene on Friday.

Sri Lanka has huge debt obligations and dwindling foreign reserves, and its struggle to pay for imports has caused the shortages. People wait in long lines for fuel, and power is cut for several hours daily because there's not enough fuel to operate generating plants and dry weather has sapped hydropower capacity.

Sri Lanka's economic woes are blamed on successive governments not diversifying exports and relying on traditional cash sources like tea, garments and tourism, and on a culture of consuming imported goods.

The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a heavy blow to Sri Lanka's economy, with the government estimating a loss of \$14 billion in the last two years.

Sri Lanka also has immense foreign debt after borrowing heavily on projects that don't earn money. Its foreign debt repayment obligations are around \$7 billion for this year alone.

According to the Central Bank, inflation rose to 17.5% in February from 16.8% a month earlier. Its expected to continue rising because the government has allowed the local currency to float freely.

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HEADLINE	04/01 Russia leaves Chernobyl control to Ukraine
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/russians-leave-chernobyl-ukraine-braces-renewed-attacks-83802867
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine -- Russian troops left the heavily contaminated Chernobyl nuclear site early Friday after returning control to the Ukrainians, authorities said, as residents in parts of eastern Ukraine braced for renewed attacks and awaited blocked supplies of food and other humanitarian relief.</p> <p>Ukraine's state power company, Energoatom, said the pullout at Chernobyl came after soldiers received "significant doses" of radiation from digging trenches in the forest in the exclusion zone around the closed plant. The International Atomic Energy Agency said it could not independently confirm the exposure claim.</p> <p>In what would be the first attack of its kind, if confirmed, the governor of Russia's Belgorod region accused Ukraine of flying helicopter gunships across the border on Friday morning and striking an oil depot.</p> <p>The depot run by Russian energy giant Rosneft is located about 35 kilometers (21 miles) north of the Ukraine-Russia border. The helicopter attack set the facility ablaze, and two people were injured, according to a Telegram post by Belgorod governor Vyacheslav Gladkov.</p> <p>"The fire at the oil depot occurred as a result of an airstrike from two helicopters of the armed forces of Ukraine, which entered the territory of Russia at a low altitude," the governor wrote on the messaging app.</p>

It was not immediately possible to verify the claim or images that were circulating on social media of the alleged attack. Russia has reported shelling from Ukraine before, including an incident last week that killed a military chaplain, but not an incursion of its airspace.

Elsewhere, Ukrainian forces have retaken the villages of Sloboda and Lukashivka, which are south of the besieged northern city of Chernihiv and located along one of the main supply routes between the city and Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, according to Britain's Defense Ministry.

Ukraine has also continued to make successful but limited counterattacks to the east and northeast of Kyiv, the ministry said.

Russian forces have subjected both Chernihiv and Kyiv to continued air and ground-launched missile strikes despite Moscow officials saying Tuesday they planned to reduce military activity in those areas.

Western officials said there were growing indications Russia was using its talk of de-escalation in Ukraine as cover to regroup, resupply its forces and redeploy them for a stepped-up offensive in the eastern part of the country.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned that Russian withdrawals from the north and center of the country were just a military tactic to build up strength for new attacks in the southeast.

"We know their intentions," Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address to the nation. "We know that they are moving away from those areas where we hit them in order to focus on other, very important ones where it may be difficult for us."

"There will be battles ahead," he added.

Ukrainian and Russian negotiators planned to resume talks via video on Friday, five weeks into a conflict that has left thousands dead and driven more than 4 million refugees from Ukraine. There seemed little faith that the two sides would find agreement on their respective demands any time soon.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said conditions weren't yet "ripe" for a cease-fire and he wasn't ready for a meeting with Zelenskyy until the negotiators do more work, Italian Premier Mario Draghi said after a Thursday telephone conversation with the Russian leader.

Following a plea from Zelenskyy when he addressed Australian Parliament on Thursday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that his country would send mine-resistant armored personnel carriers to Ukraine.

He said Friday the four-wheel drive Bushmaster vehicles, specifically requested by Zelenskyy, would be flown to Europe but did not say how many would be delivered or when.

"We're not just sending our prayers, we are sending our guns, we're sending our munitions, we're sending our humanitarian aid, we're sending all of this, our body armor, all of these things, and we're going to be sending our armored vehicles, our Bushmasters, as well," Morrison said.

In the encircled strategic port city of Mariupol, Russian forces on Thursday blocked a convoy of 45 buses attempting to evacuate people after the Russian military agreed to a limited cease-fire in the area. Only 631 people were able to get out of the city in private cars, according to the Ukrainian government.

Russian forces also seized 14 tons of food and medical supplies in a dozen buses that were trying to make it to Mariupol, Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk said.

The city has been the scene of some of the worst suffering of the war. Tens of thousands of residents managed to get out in the past few weeks by way of humanitarian corridors, reducing the population from

a prewar 430,000 to an estimated 100,000 by last week. But continued Russian attacks have repeatedly thwarted aid and evacuation convoys.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said it had been informed by Ukraine that the Russians forces at Chernobyl had transferred control of the site of the world's worst nuclear disaster to the Ukrainians in writing. The last Russian troops left Chernobyl early Friday, the Ukrainian government agency responsible for the exclusion zone said.

Energoatom gave no details on the condition of the soldiers it said were exposed to radiation and did not say how many were affected. There was no immediate comment from the Kremlin, and the IAEA said it was seeking more information.

Russian forces seized the Chernobyl site in the opening stages of the Feb. 24 invasion, raising fears that they would cause damage or disruption that could spread radiation. The workforce at the site oversees the safe storage of spent fuel rods and the concrete-entombed ruins of the reactor that exploded in 1986.

Edwin Lyman, a nuclear expert with the U.S.-based Union of Concerned Scientists, said it "seems unlikely" a large number of troops would develop severe radiation illness, but it was impossible to know for sure without more details.

IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi was in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad on Friday for talks with senior officials there about nuclear issues in Ukraine.

In addition to concerns about Chernobyl, nine of Ukraine's 15 operational reactors are currently in use, including two at the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhya facility, the IAEA said.

Early this week, the Russians said they would significantly scale back military operations in areas around Kyiv and the northern city of Chernihiv to increase trust between the two sides and help negotiations along.

But in the Kyiv suburbs, regional governor Oleksandr Palviuk said on social media Thursday that Russian forces shelled Irpin and Makariv and that there were battles around Hostomel. Pavliuk said there were Ukrainian counterattacks and some Russian withdrawals around the suburb of Brovary to the east.

At a Ukrainian military checkpoint outside Kyiv, soldiers and officers said they don't believe Russian forces have given up on the capital.

"What does it mean, significantly scaling down combat actions in the Kyiv and Chernihiv areas?" asked Brig. Gen. Valeriy Embakov. "Does it mean there will be 100 missiles instead of 200 missiles launched on Kyiv or something else?"

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said intelligence indicates Russia is not scaling back its military operations in Ukraine but is instead trying to regroup, resupply its forces and reinforce its offensive in the Donbas.

"Russia has repeatedly lied about its intentions," Stoltenberg said. At the same time, he said, pressure is being kept up on Kyiv and other cities, and "we can expect additional offensive actions bringing even more suffering."

The Donbas is the predominantly Russian-speaking industrial region where Moscow-backed separatists have been battling Ukrainian forces since 2014. In the past few days, the Kremlin, in a seeming shift in its war aims, said that its "main goal" now is gaining control of the Donbas, which consists of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, including Mariupol.

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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/australia-send-armored-vehicles-ukraine-request-83801670
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia -- Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Friday that Australia will send armored Bushmaster vehicles to Ukraine after President Volodymyr Zelenskyy specifically asked for them while appealing to Australian lawmakers for more help in Ukraine's war against Russia.</p> <p>Zelenskyy addressed the Australian Parliament on Thursday and asked for the Australian-made, four-wheel-drive vehicles.</p> <p>Morrison told reporters the vehicles will be flown over on Boeing C-17 Globemaster transport planes. He didn't specify how many would be sent or when.</p> <p>"We're not just sending our prayers, we are sending our guns, we're sending our munitions, we're sending our humanitarian aid, we're sending all of this, our body armor, all of these things and we're going to be sending our armored vehicles, our Bushmasters, as well," Morrison said.</p> <p>Zelenskyy has been tailoring his message to individual countries through video appeals like the one shown to legislators in the Australian Parliament. Lawmakers gave him standing ovation at the start and end of his 16-minute address.</p> <p>Zelenskyy also called for tougher sanctions and for Russian vessels to be banned from international ports.</p> <p>"We need more sanctions against Russia, powerful sanctions until they stop blackmailing other countries with their nuclear missiles," Zelenskyy said through an interpreter.</p> <p>Zelenskyy specifically asked for Bushmaster vehicles.</p> <p>"You have very good armed personnel vehicles, Bushmasters, that could help Ukraine substantially, and other pieces of equipment," Zelenskyy said.</p> <p>While the Ukrainian capital Kyiv is 15,000 kilometers (9,300 miles) from the Australian capital Canberra, Zelenskyy said Australia was not safe from the conflict which threatened to escalate into a nuclear war.</p> <p>He suggested that a Russian victory over Ukraine would embolden China to declare war on Taiwan.</p> <p>"The most terrible thing is that if we don't stop Russia now, if we don't hold Russia accountable, then some other countries of the world who are looking forward to similar wars against their neighbors will decide that such things are possible for them as well," Zelenskyy said.</p> <p>Zelenskyy also said Russia would not have invaded Ukraine if Moscow had been punished for the 2014 downing of a Malaysia Airlines plane in Ukraine.</p> <p>Two weeks ago, the Australian and Dutch governments launched a legal case against Russia at the International Civil Aviation Organization to hold Moscow accountable for its alleged role in the missile strike that killed all 298 people on MH17. Of the victims, 196 were Dutch citizens and 38 were Australian residents.</p> <p>Prime Minister Scott Morrison had earlier told the president that Australia would provide additional military assistance including tactical decoys, unmanned aerial and unmanned ground systems, rations and medical supplies. He later said the additional help would cost 25 million Australian dollars (\$19 million).</p> <p>"You have our prayers, but you also have our weapons, our humanitarian aid, our sanctions against those who seek to deny your freedom and you even have our coal," Morrison said.</p> <p>Australia has already promised or provided Ukraine with AU\$91 million (\$68 million) in military assistance, AU\$65 million (\$49 million) in humanitarian help and 70,000 metric tons (77,200 U.S. tons) of coal.</p>

	<p>Earlier Thursday, the government announced Australia was imposing an additional 35% tariff on all imports from Russia and Belarus starting April 25.</p> <p>Oil and energy imports from Russia will be banned from that date. Exports to Russia of Australian aluminum ore will also be banned.</p> <p>Sanctions have been imposed on more than 500 individuals and entities in Russia and Belarus. The sanctions cover 80% of the Russian banking sector and all government entities that handle Russian sovereign debt.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Iraq cleric: Iran-backed rivals form govt.
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iraqi-cleric-steps-back-asks-rivals-form-government-83793940
GIST	<p>BAGHDAD -- A powerful Iraqi Shiite cleric said Thursday that he was stepping back for the next 40 days and giving his Iran-backed rivals the chance to form the country's next government.</p> <p>The surprising move by Muqtada al-Sadr comes against the backdrop of a persisting political deadlock in Iraq, five months after general elections.</p> <p>Al-Sadr's offer came in a tweet, in which he also called on his followers not to interfere “neither positively not negatively” as his rivals form the Coordination Framework, a coalition of Iran-backed Shiite parties, try to cobble together a Cabinet.</p> <p>This translates into a nod to al-Sadr's rivals to pursue the cleric's Kurdish and Sunni allies in possible negotiations. There was no immediate response from the Coordination Framework to al-Sadr's offer.</p> <p>Iraqi political parties are at an impasse, and al-Sadr — the winner of the election — has been unable to form a coalition government. He has assailed his rivals, saying they “obstructed and are still obstructing” the process.</p> <p>The parties are at odds over the choice of candidate for president, an obstacle that may also extend to the premiership. It is also not clear which party constitutes the largest bloc in parliament because of unclear and shifting loyalties of some lawmakers and parties.</p> <p>The 40-day window offered by al-Sadr would start on the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, expected to begin this weekend, depending on the sighting of the new moon. The Islamic calendar is a lunar one, meaning the timeframe offered by al-Sadr would stretch beyond Ramadan, when observant Muslims fast from dawn to dusk.</p> <p>The development is “a clear challenge and dare” directed at his rivals while also being a “test of partners,” tweeted Farhad Alaaldin, chairman of the Iraq Advisory Council, a policy research institute.</p> <p>It was not immediately clear how sincere al-Sadr's offer was. The cleric, with a strong grassroots base, won the largest number of seats in the election but not enough to declare a parliamentary majority.</p> <p>Iran-aligned parties, including that belonging to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, have become his chief rivals. A parliament session last Saturday failed to reach the two-thirds quorum necessary to elect a president. It was largely boycotted by lawmakers associated with the Coordination Framework.</p> <p>Al-Sadr's move is a gamble: A failure by the Coordination Framework would give his party, Sairoon, significant leverage, but its success would relegate al-Sadr's party to the role of the opposition.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Native families: legacy generational trauma
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/indigenous-families-seek-justice-boarding-school-abuse-graves/story?id=83760289
GIST	<p>Hundreds of thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their families over a span of 150 years, made to live in boarding schools across the U.S. that were run by the federal government and churches in an effort to force assimilation.</p> <p>“It was a national policy to take Indian children, to beat their native language out of them, to remove them from their families so they wouldn't have that cultural teaching,” U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland told “Nightline.”</p> <p>“Native kids are born into not just their mother's arms, but into the arms of their entire communities ... when you are born into that nurturing community and all of a sudden [you’re] ripped away from that – imagine how much trauma that would have on a child.”</p> <p>According to Denise Lajimodiere, a Native American scholar and the author of "Stringing Rosaries," the purpose of these residential schools was “total assimilation into white European culture.” Native American children were forced to cut their hair and wear uniforms to conform.</p> <p>“I think they just saw these kids that they weren't even human. They saw them as savages,” she told “Nightline.”</p> <p>Once they were at the schools, the children were forced to work without getting paid and some children never made it home.</p> <p>Scholars estimate that tens of thousands of children died at the schools from abuse or disease and, in some instances, their remains were buried in unmarked graves in school cemeteries. Some children died while working on what was called an "outing," where children from the boarding schools were hired out to work for families.</p> <p>“The corporal punishment was pretty horrendous. Boarding school survivors tell of kids being taken away and disappearing and never being seen again,” Lajimodiere said.</p> <p>A legacy of generational trauma</p> <p>For more than a century, Native Americans have urged the government to acknowledge and address the generational trauma and lasting impact from the boarding school era, which spanned from 1869 through the 1960s.</p> <p>After nearly 1,000 unmarked graves of Indigenous children were unearthed in June 2021 at Indigenous boarding schools in Canada, Haaland, who is the first Native American to hold a Cabinet position, launched a federal boarding school initiative to investigate the United States’ role in implementing these policies.</p> <p>“Families deserve to know what happened. And so we are working to compile decades and decades of information so that we can hopefully give them some answers,” she said.</p> <p>Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo Tribe, oversees the government agency that historically played a major role in the forced relocation and oppression of Indigenous people. Haaland's great grandfather was taken to the United States Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which was open from 1879 to 1918.</p> <p>Lajimodiere, a citizen of the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa or Ojibwe, said that the painful legacy of these boarding schools has impacted every Native American family.</p> <p>Her father attended the Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon, from 1925 to 1929 when he was 9 years old.</p> <p>“He was stolen,” she said.</p>

At Chemawa, Marsha F. Small is on a mission to locate human remains of Indigenous children who were buried on school grounds.

“People don't like to learn the ugly America. They want the America the beautiful,” Small, a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe and a doctoral student at Montana State University-Bozeman, told “Nightline.”

“Without this healing, I don't think that America itself can heal,” she added.

Small and her team use ground penetrating radar technology to look for graves. So far, she says they have found about 222 graves, with some dating back to 1885.

“When I go into cemeteries ...I talk to the children and I, and I tell them, you know, that those that want to go home may have a possibility of going home. You're not forgotten,” she said.

A journey of healing

The boarding school era lasted for more than 150 years. By the late 1970s, many schools had closed, but others like Chemawa remained open.

Today, Chemawa's mission is to honor “unique tribal cultures.”

The number of boarding schools that were run by the U.S. government is unknown, so Lajimodiere launched her own efforts to locate as many boarding schools as she could.

Rita Means, a member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe, attended St. Francis Indian Mission School – a school operated by Jesuits from 1886 until 1972 – from the sixth grade until the 12th grade.

“In my time, I don't think anybody was forcibly taken, but I know that feeling of separation from your family,” she said.

“Any place that you can't leave is a prison. We were definitely locked in until we, you know, had to go to church at six in the morning,” she added.

Her daughter, Shelley Means, said that two generations of her family were disconnected from their children, who attended Indigenous boarding schools.

“[They] didn't learn parenting skills the way traditionally we would have taken care of each other,” she told “Nightline,” adding that she had to work hard at learning how to emotionally support her own daughter, Shylee Brave.

For Brave, her grandmother is a “survivor” and she is doing her own part to bring healing to her community.

As part of the Sicangu Youth Council in Rosebud, South Dakota, Brave traveled in July 2015 to the school in Carlisle, where more than 150 children from over 40 tribes were buried, including nine from the Rosebud Sioux tribe.

“The thing that really sparked this whole movement was asking, why are our kids still there?” she said.

“It like, really hit, like, wow, this could be my cousin, this could be my uncle, this could be my relative. What if I didn't get to go home? It just really like sunk in, like, what if this was me?” she added.

After sharing her experience with her grandmother, the Sicangu Youth Council launched an effort to bring the remains of the children of the Rosebud Sioux tribe at Carlisle back home.

	<p>They had to request the remains from the U.S. Army, which owns the school, and on July 2021 the remains of six children were finally brought back home and were escorted by Brave and members of the youth council.</p> <p>The children are now buried in the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Veterans Cemetery in South Dakota. Their names are Maude Littlegirl, Lucy Take the Tail, Alvin Braveroster or One that Kills Seven Horses, Dennis Strikesfirst, Warren Painter, and Rose Long Face.</p> <p>“It was a really hard, long journey. I mean, we really had to fight,” Brave said.</p> <p>“They didn’t get to grow up. They didn’t get to have a family,” she added, as she visited the cemetery. “I’m really happy that they’re home, but at the same time it’s like this shouldn’t have happened.”</p> <p>Haaland, whose great grandfather attended Carlisle, told Chief White House Correspondent Cecilia Vega that she is “grateful” to have an opportunity to address this painful past.</p> <p>“I have a great obligation, but I was taught by my mother and my grandfather and my grandmother that when you are asked to do something for your people that you step up,” she said.</p> <p>For Lajimodiere, Haaland’s efforts are part of her journey of “healing.”</p> <p>“I just wept,” she said, recalling Haaland’s announcement.</p> <p>“It’s like, finally, finally, after a decade of working toward this moment, here it is. And it took a native female head of the Department of Interior to make this moment happen and to start the healing journey for so many survivors.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Recall: Skippy peanut butter
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/skippy-recalls-161692-pounds-peanut-butter/story?id=83795026
GIST	<p>Skippy Foods announced a voluntary recall of some peanut butter products due to the possibility that a limited number of jars may contain small fragment of stainless steel from a piece of manufacturing equipment, according to a statement released by the Food and Drug Administration.</p> <p>The recall includes a limited number of dates of Skippy Reduced Fat Creamy Peanut, Skippy Reduced Fat Chunky Peanut Butter Spread and Skippy Creamy Peanut Butter Blended with Plant Protein. The recalled items have use by dates from early May 2023.</p> <p>The products were sold in 18 states: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma and Wisconsin.</p> <p>There have been no consumer complaints to date and all retailers that have received the affected product have been notified.</p> <p>No other sizes, varieties or packages of Skippy brand peanut butter or peanut butter spreads are included in this recall.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Solomon Islands: no to China military base
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/china-new-zealand-australia-micronesia-solomon-islands-ac5dbef6c75095da61d1b03022dbdc23
GIST	WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Seeking to counter international fears over its new security alliance with China, the Solomon Islands said Friday it won’t allow China to build a military base there.

But that insistence will do little to ease concerns about the pact from the nation's traditional partners that include New Zealand, Australia and the United States.

The leader of neighboring Micronesia added his voice to those expressing trepidation by invoking the bloody battles of World War II and warning that the pact could again see the South Pacific region become a battleground for much larger powers.

The Solomon Islands government said Thursday a draft agreement of the new security pact had been initialed by representatives from the Solomons and China and would be "cleaned up" and signed.

In a statement Friday, the Solomon Islands government said that "contrary to the misinformation promoted by anti-government commentators" the agreement did not invite China to establish a military base.

"Government is conscious of the security ramification of hosting a military base, and it will not be careless to allow such initiative to take place under its watch," the statement said.

The statement seemed to more emphatically rule out the possibility of a base after Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare had earlier told parliament it had no intention of asking China to build a base.

Sogavare said his nation sought only peace and prosperity, citing its foreign policy mantra: "We are friends to all and enemies to none." He said it wasn't a secret deal but a sovereign issue.

Under the terms of the draft agreement, China could send police, military personnel and other armed forces to the Solomon Islands "to assist in maintaining social order" and for a variety of other reasons. It could also send warships to the islands for stopovers and to replenish supplies, which had led to speculation about the possibility of China establishing a naval base on the South Pacific islands.

Micronesia President David Panuelo wrote a letter to Sogavare saying Micronesia had "grave security concerns" about the "novel and unprecedented" arrangement.

He said the two small nations had become battle grounds during World War II and that it could happen again as China, the U.S. and Australia asserted themselves in the region.

"And is it plausible that, once the spheres have been carved out, that our concerns about climate change — today's problem — would manifest into all-too-real concerns about a war in our backyards, with our people, our islands, as the playground for children playing as adults?" Panuelo wrote to Sogavare.

Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton said Friday that while it respected the Solomons' sovereignty, the deal showed that China was acting aggressively in the region.

"We need to be very cautious here because the Chinese are incredibly aggressive, the tactics that they're deploying into small island nations are quite remarkable," he told Sky News.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern this week described the possibility of Chinese military forces stationed on the Solomon Islands as "the potential militarization of the region." And the U.S. State Department said Washington did not believe China's security forces and methods needed to be exported.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said Thursday that "relevant parties should see the China-Solomon Islands security cooperation objectively and rationally and stop making irresponsible remarks."

"Attempts to provoke, obstruct and undermine China's friendly relations with the island countries is not popular and will not succeed," Wang told reporters at a daily briefing.

	<p>“China-Solomon Islands cooperation does not target any third party and is not in conflict with Solomon Islands’ cooperation with other countries. Instead, it complements the existing regional cooperation mechanisms in a positive way,” he added.</p> <p>The Solomon Islands, home to about 700,000 people, switched its diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to Beijing in 2019 — a contributing factor to riots in November last year between residents of different islands within the country.</p> <p>Australian police have been in the capital, Honiara, maintaining peace since then under a bilateral security treaty established in 2017. It provides a legal basis for the rapid deployment of Australian police, troops and associated civilians in the event of a major security challenge.</p> <p>Chinese police are already on the islands conducting a training mission.</p> <p>The Federated States of Micronesia is home to about 100,000 people. It has diplomatic relations and considers itself a “friend” of China, as well as having a close relationship with the U.S. under a compact of free association.</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	03/30 New way to report illegal robocalls
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/wa-launches-new-way-to-report-illegal-robocalls/
GIST	<p>Robocalls aren’t just annoying — some are actually illegal. As of Tuesday, there’s a new way for Washingtonians to report them.</p> <p>In a continuation of the office’s work to stop illegal robocalls, Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson launched a new form for people to report tillegal, harassing calls.</p> <p>Certain types of robocalls — phone calls that come from an automated system and play a recorded message — are legal.</p> <p>According to the attorney general’s office, political calls about candidates, charities asking for donations or informational messages like ones for a flight or a school closure are allowed without permission.</p> <p>But the illegal robocalls can be irritating, or worse, scams to steal your identity or money.</p> <p>Before this form was launched, Washingtonians could report suspicious calls through the attorney general’s office general consumer complaint form. The new complaint form for robocalls will provide more precise information for quicker reaction to complaints, the attorney general’s office said.</p> <p>“Many of our cases are based on tips we receive from Washingtonians. If robocalls are harassing you, please file a complaint with my office,” Ferguson said in a statement.</p> <p>Ferguson’s office said it has resources to track suspected illegal robocallers once people report a call and provide their own number, provider and exact time and date of the call, even when the caller identification is fake.</p> <p>In the past two years, Ferguson has filed three lawsuits dealing with illegal robocalls.</p> <p>In March 2021, a lawsuit filed by several attorneys general and the FTC resulted in two companies that made 1.7 million robocalls into Washington paying \$495,000 to legitimate charities. In August 2020, a King County Superior Court judge ordered Vancouver-based air duct cleaning companies and their owner</p>

pay \$10 million in civil penalties after the companies made more than 13 million robocalls within a two year period.

The attorney general's office filed a third lawsuit last October, which is pending, arguing that an Oregon-based company illegally called Washington residents more than 54,000 times with deceptive recorded messages.

Washington residents can now report suspected illegal robocalls at: fortress.wa.gov/atg/formhandler/ago/robocallForm.aspx

Phone scams and other illegal telemarketing calls can still be reported with the general consumer complaint form, available at: atg.wa.gov/file-complaint

Complaints can also be made to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, which received more than 6,000 complaints of phone solicitations from Washington residents in February, according to Ferguson's office.

To reduce the number of robocalls you receive, you can add your number to the national "do not call" registry at donotcall.gov

In addition to creating the new form, the attorney general's office also shared information about robocalls and telemarketing scams, as well as tips to combat them at atg.wa.gov/robocall-and-telemarketing-scams.

Here are some of the strategies the office suggests:

Know the following signs of a scam:

- Requests of personal information like your password, social security or bank account number
- Offers for something for free or at a low cost
- Requests for payment other than a credit card, like a gift card or online money transfer
- Scare tactics like threatening to cut off utilities. The government or legitimate businesses usually send a letter if there is a legal issue or problem.

What to do if you suspect a call is scam:

- If you don't recognize a number, consider allowing the call to go to voicemail. If you pick up, you can hang up immediately and report the call or ask your telephone service to block the number associated.
- However, know that scammers can fake the name and number that appears on your caller ID, so you can't always trust it
- Hang up immediately if you answer a call and it is a robocall
- Do not to pay or accept any offers.
- Resist the urge to call back or confront the caller

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HEADLINE	03/31 Treasury sanctions Russia research center
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/gladkikh-trisis-russia-sanctions-treasury-ofac/
GIST	<p>The U.S. Treasury Department's latest round of sanctions against Russians includes leaders of the institute that allegedly developed the infamous Trisis malware, as well as the researcher indicted earlier this month in that case.</p> <p>On Thursday the department's Office of Foreign Assets Control added the State Research Center of the Russian Federation Central Scientific Research Institute of Chemistry and Mechanics, or TsNIIKhM, to the list of entities sanctioned since Russia's invasion of Ukraine began.</p> <p>Also designated were Sergei Alekseevich Bobkov, the institute's director; Konstantin Vasilyevich Malevanyy, its deputy director; and Evgeny Viktorovich Gladkikh, the researcher accused of developing Trisis in an indictment unsealed March 24. Cybersecurity researchers have determined that the Trisis malware, also known as Triton, was used to target a petrochemical plant in Saudi Arabia in 2017.</p>

“Gladkikh, along with other TsNIIKhM and ADC employees, played a crucial role in the August 2017 Triton malware cyber-attack, specifically targeting the petrochemical facility’s safety instrumented systems, seeking to disrupt the facility’s cybersecurity systems, as well as the facility’s distributed controls systems,” the Treasury said in a news release Thursday. “Gladkikh’s malicious cyber actions resulted in the facility undergoing an emergency shutdown on at least two occasions.”

Trisis was built to target industrial control systems and supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) technology. Gladkikh is involved in that kind of research and also has “extensive experience working network exploitation and penetration testing,” Treasury said.

Prosecutors have [posted a \\$10 million reward](#) for information that leads to his capture.

The list of other entities sanctioned Thursday includes:

- Moscow-based OOO Serniya Engineering, which “is at the center of a procurement network engaged in proliferation activities at the direction of Russian Intelligence Services,” Treasury said.
- Moscow-based OOO Sertal, which also works “to illicitly procure dual-use equipment and technology for Russia’s defense sector.”
- Russia-based OOO Robin Treid, United Kingdom-based Majory LLP, United Kingdom-based Photon Pro LLP and Spain-based Invention Bridge SL, which are “front companies utilized by Serniya to facilitate its procurement of key equipment for the Government of the Russian Federation.”

The European Union and Japan have placed export-related restrictions on Serniya, Sertal and Photon Pro recently.

“The UK is also taking coordinated action on the companies within its jurisdiction,” Treasury said.

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HEADLINE	03/31 GhostWriter BitB Ukraine-related attacks
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/belarusian-ghostwriter-actor-picks-up-bitb-for-ukraine-related-attacks/179210/
GIST	<p>Ghostwriter – a threat actor previously linked with the Belarusian Ministry of Defense – has glommed onto the recently disclosed, nearly invisible “Browser-in-the-Browser” (BitB) credential-phishing technique in order to continue its ongoing exploitation of the war in Ukraine.</p> <p>In a Wednesday post, Google’s Threat Analysis Group (TAG) said that they’d already spotted BitB being used by multiple government-backed actors prior to the media turning a laser eye on BitB earlier this month. The fresh attention was triggered by a penetration tester and security researcher – who goes by the handle mr.d0x – who posted a description of BitB.</p> <p>Ghostwriter actors quickly picked up on BitB, combining it with another of the advanced persistent threat’s (APT’s) phishing techniques: namely, hosting credential-phishing landing pages on compromised sites.</p> <p>BitB</p> <p>The newly disclosed credential-phishing method of BitB takes advantage of third-party single sign-on (SSO) options embedded on websites that issue popup windows for authentication, such as “Sign in with Google,” Facebook, Apple or Microsoft.</p> <p>These days, SSO popups are a routine way to authenticate when you sign in.</p> <p>But according to mr.d0x’s post, completely fabricating a malicious version of a popup window is a snap: It’s “quite simple” using basic HTML/CSS, the researcher said a few weeks ago. The concocted popups simulate a browser window within the browser, spoofing a legitimate domain and making it possible to stage convincing phishing attacks.</p>

“Combine the window design with an iframe pointing to the malicious server hosting the phishing page, and [it’s] basically indistinguishable,” mr.d0x wrote at the time.

JavaScript can make the window appear on a link, button click or page loading screen. As well, libraries – such as the popular JQuery JavaScript library – can make the window appear visually appealing.

BitB Credential Phishing on Compromised Sites

In Wednesday’s post, TAG gave an example, shown below, of how Ghostwriter has taken to hosting credential phishing landing pages on compromised sites:

The BitB technique shown above entails drawing a login page that appears to be on the passport.i.ua domain, over the page hosted on the compromised site. “Once a user provides credentials in the dialog, they are posted to an attacker controlled domain,” TAG researchers said.

TAG has recently observed Ghostwriter credential-phishing on these domains:

- login-verification[.]top
- login-verify[.]top
- ua-login[.]top
- secure-ua[.]space
- secure-ua[.]top

Other Campaigns Launched by Government-Backed Actors in China, Iran, North Korea & Russia

Since early March, Ghostwriter’s use of BitB is only one of a trio of cyber aggressions that TAG [has been tracking](#) with regards to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The use of the war as a lure in phishing and malware campaigns has continued to grow throughout the month, TAG said, with associated cyber-assaults coming in from government-backed actors from China, Iran, North Korea and Russia, as well as from various unattributed groups, according to TAG’s Wednesday post.

Actors “have used various Ukraine war-related themes in an effort to get targets to open malicious emails or click malicious links,” TAG said.

Curious Gorge

Besides Ghostwriter’s BitB campaigns, TAG has spotted a group it’s calling Curious Gorge that it attributes to China’s PLA SSF conducting campaigns against government and military organizations in Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia.

“While this activity largely does not impact Google products, we remain engaged and are providing notifications to victim organizations,” TAG advised.

Below is a list of IPs used in Curious Gorge campaigns that TAG has recently observed:

- 5.188.108[.]119
- 91.216.190[.]58
- 103.27.186[.]23
- 114.249.31[.]171
- 45.154.12[.]167

COLDRIIVER

Finally, TAG has also observed COLDRIIVER – a Russia-based threat actor, sometimes referred to as Calisto – that has launched credential-phishing campaigns targeting several United States-based NGOs and think tanks, the military of a Balkans country, and a Ukraine based defense contractor.

Now, however, for the first time, COLDRIIVER is targeting the military of multiple Eastern European countries and a NATO Centre of Excellence, TAG reported.

	<p>Google doesn't know how successful these campaigns have been, given that they were issued from newly created Gmail accounts to non-Google accounts. At any rate, Google hasn't see any Gmail accounts successfully compromised because of these campaigns, TAG said.</p> <p>Recently observed COLDRIIVER credential phishing domains:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • protect-link[.]online • drive-share[.]live • protection-office[.]live • proton-viewer[.]com
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HEADLINE	04/01 Lazarus Group: trojanized DeFi wallet app
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/04/north-korean-hackers-distributing.html
GIST	<p>The North Korean state-backed hacking crew, otherwise known as the Lazarus Group, has been attributed to yet another financially motivated campaign that leverages a trojanized decentralized finance (DeFi) wallet app to distribute a fully-featured backdoor onto compromised Windows systems.</p> <p>The app, which is equipped with functionalities to save and manage a cryptocurrency wallet, is also designed to trigger the launch of the implant that can take control of the infected host. Russian cybersecurity firm Kaspersky said it first encountered the rogue application in mid-December 2021.</p> <p>The infection scheme initiated by the app also results in the deployment of the installer for a legitimate application, which gets overwritten with a trojanized version in an effort to cover its tracks. That said, the initial access avenue is unclear, although it's suspected to be a case of social engineering.</p> <p>The spawned malware, which masquerades as Google's Chrome web browser, subsequently launches a wallet app built for the DeFiChain, while also establishing connections to a remote attacker-controlled domain and awaiting further instructions from the server.</p> <p>Based on the response received from the command-and-control (C2) server, the trojan proceeds to execute a wide range of commands, granting it the ability to collect system information, enumerate and terminate processes, delete files, launch new processes, and save arbitrary files on the machine.</p> <p>The C2 infrastructure used in this campaign exclusively consisted of previously compromised web servers located in South Korea, prompting the cybersecurity company to work with the country's computer emergency response team (KrCERT) to dismantle the servers.</p> <p>The findings come more than two months after Kaspersky disclosed details of a similar "SnatchCrypto" campaign mounted by the Lazarus sub-group tracked as BlueNoroff to drain digital funds from victims' MetaMask wallets.</p> <p>"For the Lazarus threat actor, financial gain is one of the prime motivations, with a particular emphasis on the cryptocurrency business. As the price of cryptocurrency surges, and the popularity of non-fungible token (NFT) and decentralized finance (DeFi) businesses continues to swell, the Lazarus group's targeting of the financial industry keeps evolving," Kaspersky GReAT researchers pointed out.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 'AcidRain' new modem wiper malware
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/sentinellabs-new-modem-wiper-malware-may-be-connected-viasat-hack
GIST	<p>A pair of security researchers at SentinelLabs have intercepted a piece of destructive wiper malware hitting routers and modems and found digital breadcrumbs suggesting a link to the devastating Viasat hack that took down wind turbines in Germany.</p>

SentinelLabs malware hunters Juan Andres Guerrero-Saade and Max van Amerongen believe the newest wiper -- called AcidRain -- is part of a larger supply chain attack aimed at crippling Viasat's satellite internet service.

In an [official statement](#), Viasat confirmed a dual-pronged attack against its KA-SAT network ended with malicious software commands rendering tens of thousands of modems across Europe inoperable by overwriting key data in their internal memory.

The Viasat attack, coming just as Russia was launching its invasion of Ukraine, also impacted modem service in France and Italy and even paralyzed wind turbines in Germany, according to published reports.

Now, [SentinelLab's threat hunters are sharing notes](#) on the discovery of the newest wiper and documenting code overlaps and other evidence linking the malware to the satellite network takedown.

"[We believe] the threat actor used the KA-SAT management mechanism in a supply-chain attack to push a wiper designed for modems and routers," Guerrero-Saade and Van Amerongen wrote. "A wiper for this kind of device would overwrite key data in the modem's flash memory, rendering it inoperable and in need of reflashing or replacing."

The researchers described Viacom's public statement as "incomplete" and said its own technical analysis found similarities with the ongoing VPNFilter malware attacks attributed by the U.S. FBI to a known Russian government APT group.

"We assess with medium-confidence that there are developmental similarities between AcidRain and a VPNFilter stage 3 destructive plugin. In 2018, the FBI and Department of Justice attributed the VPNFilter campaign to the Russian government," the researchers said.

Noting that AcidRain is the 7th wiper malware associated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the SentinelLabs team said the suspicious file was uploaded to the VirusTotal multi-scanner service from Italy with the name 'ukrop' and was designed to be destructive.

"AcidRain's functionality is relatively straightforward and takes a bruteforce attempt that possibly signifies that the attackers were either unfamiliar with the particulars of the target firmware or wanted the tool to remain generic and reusable," the report said.

"The binary performs an in-depth wipe of the filesystem and various known storage device files. If the code is running as root, AcidRain performs an initial recursive overwrite and delete of non-standard files in the filesystem." it added.

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HEADLINE	03/31 BlackGuard password-stealing malware
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/new-blackguard-password-stealing-malware-sold-on-hacker-forums/
GIST	<p>A new information-stealing malware named BlackGuard is winning the attention of the cybercrime community, now sold on numerous darknet markets and forums for a lifetime price of \$700 or a subscription of \$200 per month.</p> <p>The stealer can snatch sensitive information from a broad range of applications, pack everything in a ZIP archive and send it to the C2 of the malware-as-a-service (MaaS) operation.</p> <p>Threat actors who purchased the subscription can then access the BlackGuard web panel to retrieve the stolen data logs, either exploiting them themselves or selling them to others.</p> <p>BlackGuard was spotted and analyzed by researchers at Zscaler, who have noticed a sudden spike in the popularity of the malware, especially after the abrupt shutdown of Raccoon Stealer.</p>

Bleeping Computer was able to find that BlackGuard first appeared on Russian-speaking forums in January 2022, circulated privately for testing purposes.

Extensive stealing abilities

As with all modern information-stealers, there aren't many apps storing or handling sensitive user data that are not in BlackGuard's targeting scope, and the focus is heavy on cryptocurrency assets.

BlackGuard will seek the presence of the following software and attempt to steal user data from them:

- **Web browsers:** Passwords, cookies, autofill, and history from Chrome, Opera, Firefox, MapleStudio, Iridium, 7Star, CentBrowser, Chedot, Vivaldi, Kometa, Elements Browser, Epic Privacy Browser, uCozMedia, Coowon, liebao, QIP Surf, Orbitum, Comodo, Amigo, Torch, Comodo, 360Browser, Maxthon3, K-Melon, Sputnik, Nichrome, CocCoc, Uran, Chromodo, Edge, BraveSoftware
- **Wallet browser extensions:** Binance, coin98, Phantom, Mobox, XinPay, Math10, Metamask, BitApp, Guildwallet, iconx, Sollet, Slope Wallet, Starcoin, Swash, Finnie, KEPLR, Crocobit, OXYGEN, Nifty, Liquidity, Auvitas wallet, Math wallet, MTV wallet, Rabet wallet, Ronin wallet, Yoroi wallet, ZilPay wallet, Exodus, Terra Station, Jaxx
- **Cryptocurrency wallets:** AtomicWallet, BitcoinCore, DashCore, Electrum, Ethereum, Exodus, LitecoinCore, Monero, Jaxx, Zcash, Solar, Zap, AtomicDEX, Binance, Frame, TokenPocket, Wassabi
- **Email:** Outlook
- **Messengers:** Telegram, Signal, Tox, Element, Pidgin, Discord
- **Other:** NordVPN, OpenVPN, ProtonVpn, Totalcommander, Filezilla, WinSCP, Steam

The collected information is bundled in a ZIP file, also known as logs, and sent to the C2 server via a POST request, along with a system profiling report that sets a unique hardware ID for the victim and determines their location.

Anti-detection features

BlackGuard's evasion capabilities are still under heavy development, but some systems are already in place to help the malware escape detection and analysis.

First, it is packed with a crypter, and all its strings are base64 obfuscated, so many anti-virus tools relying on static detection will miss it.

Any AVs running on the system will be detected by the malware, which will then attempt to kill their processes and terminate their operation.

The malware also checks the victim's IP address, and if it's running on a system in Russia or any other CIS country, it will stop and exit. This is yet another indication of the origin of the malware.

Finally, an anti-debug feature blocks the operation of the mouse and keyboard inputs, making it further difficult for researchers to analyze the malware.

Outlook

Info-stealers are on the rise, with [Redline](#), [MarsStealer](#), [Vidar Stealer](#), and [AZORult](#) currently dominating the space.

The exit of Raccoon Stealer, which was one of the biggest players, has left a gap in the cybercrime market, so other MaaS operators will try to take advantage of this development.

Daria Romana Pop, a threat analyst at [KELA](#), has shared the following insights with Bleeping Computer on the status of the info-stealers landscape:

"Given the increase in usage and exploitation of compromised accounts and data obtained by information stealers as a vector for initial access to a target, KELA has recently observed new variants being advertised

	<p>on cybercrime forums, as threat actors aim at improving the malware capabilities to better avoid detection and to advance the data collection and exfiltration processes."</p> <p>"BlackGuard stealer launched in early 2021. As cybercriminals are constantly testing the capabilities of such malicious tools, they do not shy away from demanding more quality and improvements. KELA came across several recent discussions in which users were complaining about BlackGuard not being able to properly avoid detection. As in any business, the operators promised to provide an updated version in no time."</p> <p>"In a different scenario, KELA identified META - a new information stealer very similar in appearance to RedLine, whose collected data is being sold on the TwoEasy botnet marketplace. The stealer was launched at the beginning of March, now sold for USD125 per month or USD1000 for unlimited use, and the operators claim that it is an improved version of RedLine."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 CISA orders agencies patch Sophos bug
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/cisa-orders-agencies-to-patch-actively-exploited-sophos-firewall-bug/
GIST	<p>The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has ordered federal civilian agencies on Thursday to patch a critical Sophos firewall bug and seven other vulnerabilities within the next three weeks, all exploited in ongoing attacks.</p> <p>As Sophos revealed almost one week ago, the CVE-2022-1040 bug enables attackers to bypass authentication via the User Portal or Webadmin interface and execute arbitrary code remotely.</p> <p>Two days later, the cybersecurity vendor amended its security advisory, saying it alerted a small set of South Asian organizations targeted with CVE-2022-1040 exploits.</p> <p>CISA also ordered federal agencies to patch a high severity arbitrary file upload vulnerability (CVE-2022-26871) in the Trend Micro Apex Central product management console that can be abused in remote code execution attacks.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Trend Micro said it has observed "at least one active attempt of potential exploitation" of this vulnerability in the wild.</p> <p>CISA added six more vulnerabilities to its Known Exploited Vulnerabilities Catalog today, all of them also exploited in ongoing attacks.</p> <p>According to a November 2021 binding operational directive (BOD 22-01), Federal Civilian Executive Branch Agencies (FCEB) agencies must secure their systems against these security flaws, with CISA giving them until April 21 to patch the ones added today.</p> <p>"These types of vulnerabilities are a frequent attack vector for malicious cyber actors of all types and pose significant risk to the federal enterprise," the US cybersecurity agency explains.</p> <p>While the BOD 22-01 directive only applies to FCEB agencies, CISA has also urged private and public sector organizations to prioritize patching these actively abused security bugs to reduce their networks' exposure to ongoing cyberattacks.</p> <p>CISA has added hundreds of vulnerabilities to its list of actively exploited bugs after issuing this binding directive, asking US federal agencies to patch them as soon as possible to prevent security breaches.</p> <p>Since the start of the year, the cybersecurity agency has also ordered agencies to patch actively exploited zero-days in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google Chrome (CVE-2022-1096)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mozilla's Firefox web browser (CVE-2022-26485) • Google Chrome (CVE-2022-0609) and Adobe Commerce/Magento Open Source (CVE-2022-24086) • iPhones, iPads, and Macs (CVE-2022-22620)
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HEADLINE	03/31 Chinese hacking group uses new 'Fire Chili'
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/chinese-hacking-group-uses-new-fire-chili-windows-rootkit/
GIST	<p>The Chinese hacking group Deep Panda is targeting VMware Horizon servers with the Log4Shell exploit to deploy a novel rootkit named 'Fire Chili.'</p> <p>The rootkit is digitally signed using a certificate from Frostburn Studios (game developer) or one from Comodo (security software) to evade detection by AV tools.</p> <p>Analysts at Fortinet who tracked Deep Panda's recent activity believe the certificates have been stolen from the mentioned software developers.</p> <p>Deep Panda is a notorious Chinese APT focusing on cyber-espionage operations that has been active for many years now. The FBI had arrested one of its members back in 2017 after linking him with the exploitation of three zero-day vulnerabilities.</p> <p>Fire Chili rootkit</p> <p>In a recent Deep Panda campaign discovered by Fortinet, the hacking group is deploying the new 'Fire Chili' rootkit to evade detection on compromised systems.</p> <p>A rootkit is malware typically installed as a driver that hooks various Windows APIs to hide the presence of other files and configuration settings in the operating system. For example, by hooking Windows programming functions, a rootkit can filter data to not display malicious file names, processes, and Registry keys APIs to Windows programs requesting the data.</p> <p>In the attacks, the rootkit is signed by valid digital certificates allowing it to bypass detection by security software and load into Windows without any warnings.</p> <p>Upon launch, Fire Chili performs basic system tests to ensure it's not running on a simulated environment and checks that the kernel structures and objects to be abused during operation are present.</p> <p>Fortinet reports that the most recent supported operating system version for Fire Chili is Windows 10 Creators Update, released in April 2017.</p> <p>The goal of the rootkit is to keep file operations, processes, registry key additions, and malicious network connections hidden from the user and any security software that could be running on the compromised machine.</p> <p>For this hiding function, the malware uses IOCTLs (input/output control system calls) that are pre-populated with the malicious artifacts and can be dynamically configured.</p> <p>Winnti overlaps</p> <p>While looking into the latest Deep Panda campaign, Fortinet found several overlaps with Winnti, another notorious Chinese hacking group known for using digitally signed certificates.</p> <p>Also, Winnti is known for persistently targeting gaming companies, so they could have stolen those certificates during one of their successful campaigns.</p>

"The reason these tools are linked to two different groups is unclear at this time. It's possible that the groups' developers shared resources, such as stolen certificates and C2 infrastructure, with each other. This may explain why the samples were only signed several hours after being compiled." - [Fortinet](#)

Sophisticated hacking collectives that focus on cyberespionage, and not so much for financial profit, are more likely to be backed or even coordinated by government handlers, so this overlap is hardly surprising.

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HEADLINE	03/30 Russia prepares destructive cyberattacks
SOURCE	https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/30/russia-cyber-attacks-us-ukraine-biden/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Russia is preparing disruptive cyberattacks that could target U.S. energy and financial industries to cause further pain to the Biden administration, in retaliation for heavy sanctions against the Kremlin for its invasion of Ukraine, several people familiar with the matter told <i>Foreign Policy</i>.</p> <p>The FBI warned five U.S. energy companies in mid-March that computers using Russian internet addresses had been scanning their networks, in a possible prelude to bigger cyberattacks. Top U.S. cybersecurity officials have warned that Russia is looking to conduct disruptive or destructive digital attacks, as opposed to conducting routine espionage.</p> <p>The Russian handiwork could provide a means for poking the United States and other NATO countries for their support of Ukraine without provoking a wider conflict. Unlike the tit-for-tat ladder of escalation that U.S. military doctrine applies to a possible nuclear conflict with Russia or China, American officials over the last three administrations have struggled to draw clear rules of the road for cyberattacks. Jen Easterly, director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, said last week that every U.S. sector is likely vulnerable to digital strikes.</p> <p>Russia, which seems to have little defense for American- and European-delivered anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles on the Ukrainian battlefield, doesn't have to hit the biggest American target to have an impact, experts said, but can bloody the nose of U.S. companies in digital attacks that fall below the threshold of demanding a response from President Joe Biden and his team.</p> <p>"The goal is to inflict pain in a way that they can walk back from," said Nick Biasini, the head of outreach at Cisco Talos, the cybersecurity company's threat intelligence arm. "They're going to be going after where they can inflict damage, where they can actually cause pain."</p> <p>Dave Lewis, a Cisco global advisory chief information security officer, took it one step further. "Back in the early days of the internet, the attackers would try to get their defacement up and that was their whole modus operandi," he said. "Now it's just a matter of whose IP [address] is coming up next. They're going to cast a wide net and see what they can hit."</p> <p>Most companies have been preparing for a range of scenarios for years that Russia could roll out, including denial of service attacks to shut down networks by flooding them with traffic, defacement of government and corporate websites, or ransomware attacks that seize and lock down servers until their operators cough up cash, like the 2021 attack that knocked out the Colonial pipeline in the southeastern United States for nearly a week.</p> <p>But experts believe that Russia doesn't have to use digital attacks that harm physical infrastructure in the United States and elsewhere to cause problems. Biasini said that Russia had learned from the Colonial pipeline attack that it could cause chaos by simply hacking into the enterprise software that underlies energy companies, instead of taking more destructive and sophisticated cyberattacks that render equipment inoperable.</p> <p>There are also public signals that Russian hackers could put U.S. energy companies in the crosshairs. The U.S. warnings come as pro-Kremlin propaganda channels and news outlets have ridiculed the Biden</p>

administration's assertion that Russian President Vladimir Putin is responsible for higher global gas prices because of the wider invasion of Ukraine.

Both the United States and the United Kingdom have barred imports of Russian oil and natural gas, and major European states such as Germany—which already shelved the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project over the invasion—have promised to begin the arduous process of weaning themselves off of Russian energy, which accounts for more than 40 percent of European gas imports.

“It’s kind of paradoxical,” said Gavin Wilde, a nonresident fellow at Defense Priorities and an expert on Russia and information warfare who previously served as a director for Russia, Baltic, and Caucasus affairs on the U.S. National Security Council. “The more isolated Russia is on the global stage, the fewer constraints it may feel to act in cyberspace.”

Experts said that the higher energy prices go, the more difficult it could become for the United States to keep antsy European capitals in line with crushing sanctions on the Russians. “Now, I think, would be a good time from the Russian standpoint to do it, given that they’re sort of getting into a standstill on the ground in Ukraine,” said Dmitri Alperovitch, a cybersecurity expert at the Silverado Policy Accelerator. “They can refocus their attention on the West and try to divide the Europeans from the U.S. on these sanctions moves.”

But even though American energy and financial companies have been girding themselves for a range of possible Russian cyberscenarios, the Kremlin’s well-honed capability and determination to render U.S. networks inoperable could make it a formidable adversary, even for the best-defended firms. “If the Russians focus their efforts on a target and they want to compromise that target and destroy it, they’ll be able to do so,” Alperovitch said.

These aren’t garden-variety smash-and-grab cybercrime attacks that U.S. officials and experts are expecting from Russia this time. Russia tends to blur the line between criminal gangs and government-backed hackers, experts said, making it difficult to determine exactly what the Kremlin will order. “You’re dealing with an adversary that’s in a very difficult mindset and one that’s shifting all the time,” said Biasini, the Cisco expert. “So it’s something that may be on the table today [but] might be off the table tomorrow and vice versa.” In the past, Russia has also drawn on privateers and activists motivated by financial gains.

Domestically, the Russian government has been systematically tightening its grip on its own cybersphere, too—especially over the past few years—in pursuit of a grand strategy to cement into law the Kremlin’s total control over the internet. Since 2019, when Putin introduced a set of amendments granting the Kremlin the power to interfere with the dissemination of information online, Russians have been engaging with an increasingly engineered, censored internet. A flurry of laws passed since then have only put more pressure on tech companies to comply or face fines and other kinds of punishment.

For example, the Russian government throttled—intentionally slowed down—Twitter when the social media company refused to remove posts showing minors at protests during a surge in support for Alexei Navalny, the imprisoned Russian opposition leader, when he experienced a sharp deterioration in health in March 2021. The Kremlin had labeled sensitive content involving minors and sensitive issues, such as drug abuse and suicide, as prohibited, using it as leverage to cover up the scope of dissent, explained Grant Baker, a technology and democracy researcher at the U.S.-based nonprofit Freedom House.

During the monthlong war in Ukraine, Russian hackers have mostly tried to grab as many footholds as they can in Ukrainian networks to steal information, gain remote access, and use malicious so-called wiper software to destroy valuable files, Lewis and Biasini, the Cisco experts, told *Foreign Policy*. Biasini said Cisco and other U.S. companies are working with Ukraine to kill significant numbers of remote access Trojans that are used to gain remote control of computer systems.

But just as U.S. officials believe that Russian troops have run into stiffer-than-expected resistance from Ukrainian troops on the physical battlefield, Kyiv has also proved more resilient in cyberspace than the

Kremlin anticipated, U.S. officials and experts said. Speaking during a Senate hearing on Tuesday, Gen. Tod Wolters, the head of U.S. European Command and NATO's supreme allied commander, told lawmakers that Ukraine's command of its military forces remained in place, while Russia is facing difficulties getting military orders to its units due to problems with its communications equipment, as well as disciplinary infractions in the ranks. Wolters added that he believed the United States and NATO had "dramatically" improved their offensive and defensive cyber tactics and ability to control the information environment over the course of the Ukraine conflict.

"The internet's a live-fire environment," said Lewis, the Cisco cybersecurity expert. "They're just one more adversary in an absolute rogue's gallery that is out there."

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HEADLINE	03/31 LockBit victim estimates attack cost \$42M
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/lockbit-victim-estimates-cost-of-ransomware-attack-to-be-42-million/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Atento, a provider of customer relationship management (CRM) services, has published its 2021 financial performance results, which show a massive impact of \$42.1 million due to a ransomware attack the firm suffered in October last year.</p> <p>More specifically, the disruption caused by the cyberattack affected the company's Brazil-based operations, resulting in a revenue loss of \$34.8 million and an additional \$7.3 million in costs related to mitigating the impact of the incident.</p> <p>These costs include fees related to bolstering security, protecting data, timely threat detection, and implementing effective remediation measures.</p> <p>Atento is one of the world's leading providers of CRM and business process outsourcing services with a particularly strong presence on the Latin American market.</p> <p>The firm maintains operations in thirteen countries, employs 154,000 people, and has over 400 multinational corporation clients engaging in telecommunications, banking, retail, and public administration.</p> <p>"Like so many companies in the current era, including some of the world's technology leaders, we were struck by a cyberattack, which impacted our fourth-quarter results," writes Atento's CEO in the message to investors</p> <p>"This impact proved to be far greater than we initially expected due to the complexities of these events and how the aftershocks manifest themselves."</p> <p>LockBit attack</p> <p>Atento announced the cyberattack on October 22, 2021, stating that it had to suspend the operation of its Brazil-based systems to contain the threat.</p> <p>The customers only got back limited services after 24 hours, as the firm progressively resumed data center operations and gradually recovered parts of the impacted network.</p> <p>Bleeping Computer found the associated listing on the LockBit site, dating to November 01, 2021, announcing the publication of the stolen files.</p> <p>This clearly indicates that Atento refused to pay the ransom, so the negotiations with the ransomware gang, if any, reached a dead end, leading to the threat actor subsequently leaking the stolen data.</p>

	<p>LockBit's ransom demand remains unknown but the ransomware gang is no stranger from asking millions from its victims in exchange for the decryption tool.</p> <p>The best way to tackle the ransomware menace is to upgrade your security stance through regular vulnerability scanning, invest in multi-faceted detection solutions, and maintain a comprehensive and systematic data backup scheme.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Phishing abuses Azure Static Web Apps
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/microsoft/phishing-uses-azure-static-web-pages-to-impersonate-microsoft/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Phishing attacks are abusing Microsoft Azure's Static Web Apps service to steal Microsoft, Office 365, Outlook, and OneDrive credentials.</p> <p>Azure Static Web Apps is a Microsoft service that helps build and deploy full-stack web apps to Azure from GitHub or Azure DevOps code repositories.</p> <p>It allows developers to use custom domains for branding web apps, and it provides web hosting for static content such as HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and images.</p> <p>As security researcher MalwareHunterTeam discovered, threat actors have also noticed that the custom branding and the web hosting features can easily be used to host static landing phishing pages.</p> <p>Attackers are now actively using Microsoft's service against its customers, actively targeting users with Microsoft, Office 365, Outlook, and OneDrive accounts.</p> <p>....some of the landing pages and login forms used in these phishing campaigns look almost exactly like official Microsoft pages.</p> <p>Azure Static Web Apps adds legitimacy</p> <p>Using the Azure Static Web Apps platform to target Microsoft users is an excellent tactic. Each landing page automatically gets its own secure page padlock in the address bar due to the *.1.azurestaticapps.net wildcard TLS certificate.</p> <p>This will likely trick even the most suspicious targets after seeing the certificate issued by Microsoft Azure TLS Issuing CA 05 to *.1.azurestaticapps.net, thus validating the phishing page as an official Microsoft login form in the eyes of potential victims.</p> <p>This also makes such landing pages a helpful tool when targeting the users of other platforms, including Rackspace, AOL, Yahoo, and other email providers, due to the fake veil of security added by the legitimate Microsoft TLS certs.</p> <p>When trying to detect when a phishing attack is targeting you, the standard advice is to closely check the URL when asked to fill in your account credentials in a login form.</p> <p>Unfortunately, the phishing campaigns abusing Azure Static Web Apps make this advice almost worthless since many users will get tricked by the azurestaticapps.net subdomain and the valid TLS certificate.</p> <p>This is not the first time a Microsoft service has been exploited in phishing attacks to target the company's own customers.</p> <p>Phishing campaigns also use the *.blob.core.windows.net wildcard certificate provided by Microsoft's Azure Blob Storage to target Office 365 and Outlook users.</p> <p>BleepingComputer reached out to Microsoft for comment and we'll update the story if we hear back.</p>

HEADLINE	03/30 UK NCSC: rethink Russia supply chain risk
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/ncsc-rethink-russian-supply-chain/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>One of the UK's top security agencies has urged the public sector, critical infrastructures (CNI) and other organizations to reconsider the potential risks associated with any "Russian-controlled" parts of their supply chain.</p> <p>Ian Levy, technical director of the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), said there's no evidence to suggest that the Russian state is about to force commercial providers to damage UK interests. However, that doesn't mean it isn't happening or won't at some point in the future, he added.</p> <p>"Russian law already contains legal obligations on companies to assist the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), and the pressure to do so may increase in a time of war. We also have hackers on each side, further complicating matters, so the overall risk has materially changed," Levy argued.</p> <p>"The war has proven many widely held beliefs wrong and the situation remains highly unpredictable. In our view, it would be prudent to plan for the possibility that this could happen. In times of such uncertainty, the best approach is to make sure your systems are as resilient as you can reasonably make them."</p> <p>The new NCSC advice applies to: all UK public sector organizations; those providing services to Ukraine; CNI firms; organizations doing work that could be seen as running counter to Russian interests; and high-profile organizations whose compromise would be a PR win for the Kremlin.</p> <p>Levy argued that organizations more likely to be a target of Russian aggression need to reconsider any reliance on Russian tech or services. Those who use services sourced from inside the country need to think about increased cyber-risk, even if the provider itself is not Russian, he added.</p> <p>"You may choose to remove Russian products and services proactively, wait until your contract expires (or your next tech refresh), or do it in response to some geopolitical event. Alternatively, you may choose to live with the risk," Levy continued.</p> <p>"Whatever you choose, remember that cybersecurity, even in a time of global unrest, remains a balance of different risks. Rushing to change a product that's deeply embedded in your enterprise could end up causing the very damage you're trying to prevent."</p> <p>Even those companies which aren't likely to be a target should remember that global sanctions could impact the availability of any Russian technology services.</p> <p>There was some good news from the NCSC. Levy said individuals using Kaspersky products could continue to do so relatively safely. He claimed that "massive, global cyber-attacks" are unlikely to be launched due to the conflict.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 US warned firms: Kaspersky software risk
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/technology/exclusive-us-warned-firms-about-russias-kaspersky-software-day-after-invasion-2022-03-31/
GIST	<p>March 31 (Reuters) - The U.S. government began privately warning some American companies the day after Russia invaded Ukraine that Moscow could manipulate software designed by Russian cybersecurity company Kaspersky to cause harm, according to a senior U.S. official and two people familiar with the matter.</p> <p>The classified briefings are part of Washington's broader strategy to prepare providers of critical infrastructure such as water, telecoms and energy for potential Russian intrusions.</p>

President Joe Biden said last week that sanctions imposed on Russia for its Feb. 24 attack on Ukraine could result in a backlash, including cyber disruptions, but the White House did not offer specifics.

"The risk calculation has changed with the Ukraine conflict," said the senior U.S. official about Kaspersky's software. "It has increased."

Kaspersky, one of the cybersecurity industry's most popular anti-virus software makers, is headquartered in Moscow and was founded by a former Russian intelligence officer, Eugene Kaspersky.

A Kaspersky spokeswoman said in a statement that the briefings about purported risks of Kaspersky software would be "further damaging" to Kaspersky's reputation "without giving the company the opportunity to respond directly to such concerns" and that it "is not appropriate or just."

The senior U.S. official said Kaspersky's Russia-based staff could be coerced into providing or helping establish remote access into their customers' computers by Russian law enforcement or intelligence agencies.

Kaspersky, which has an office in the United States, lists partnerships with Microsoft, Intel and IBM on its website. Microsoft declined to comment. Intel and IBM did not respond to requests for comment.

On March 25, the Federal Communications Commission added Kaspersky to its list of communications equipment and service providers deemed threats to U.S. national security.

It is not the first time Washington has said Kaspersky could be influenced by the Kremlin.

The Trump administration spent months banning Kaspersky from government systems and warning numerous companies to not use the software in 2017 and 2018.

U.S. security agencies conducted a series of similar cybersecurity briefings surrounding the Trump ban. The content of those meetings four years ago was comparable to the new briefings, said one of the people familiar with the matter.

Over the years, Kaspersky has consistently denied wrongdoing or any secret partnership with Russian intelligence.

It is unclear whether a specific incident or piece of new intelligence led to the security briefings. The senior official declined to comment on classified information.

Until now no U.S. or allied intelligence agency has ever offered direct, public proof of a backdoor in Kaspersky software.

Following the Trump decision, Kaspersky opened a series of transparency centers, where it says partners can review its code to check for malicious activity. A company blog post at the time explained the goal was to build trust with customers after the U.S. accusations.

But the U.S. official said the transparency centers are not "even a fig leaf" because they do not address the U.S. government's concern.

"Moscow software engineers handle the [software] updates, that's where the risk comes," they said. "They can send malicious commands through the updaters and that comes from Russia."

Cybersecurity experts say that because of how anti-virus software normally functions on computers where it is installed, it requires a deep level of control to discover malware. This makes anti-virus software an inherently advantageous channel to conduct espionage.

	<p>In addition, Kaspersky's products are also sometimes sold under white label sales agreements. This means the software can be packaged and renamed in commercial deals by information technology contractors, making their origin difficult to immediately determine.</p> <p>While not referring to Kaspersky by name, Britain's cybersecurity centre on Tuesday said organizations providing services related to Ukraine or critical infrastructure should reconsider the risk associated with using Russian computer technology in their supply chains.</p> <p>"We have no evidence that the Russian state intends to suborn Russian commercial products and services to cause damage to UK interests, but the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence," the National Cyber Security Centre said in a blog post.</p>
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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	03/30 Oregon: 6 th highest domestic extremism
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/report-oregon-saw-the-6th-highest-number-of-domestic-extremism-incidents-over-the-last-decade
GIST	<p>SALEM, Ore. — Over the past decade, Oregon saw the sixth-highest number of violent domestic extremism incidents in the nation, according to a new report from the secretary of state's office.</p> <p>Secretary of State Shemia Fagan and the Oregon Audits Division released an advisory report on Wednesday that identifies efforts that Oregon state agencies can undertake to thwart it.</p> <p><i>"Oregon must be an inclusive place where everyone is and feels safe." said Secretary of State Shemia Fagan. "The rise in domestic terrorism is an immediate threat to Oregonians and we cannot simply wait for the next incident to occur. We can and must take immediate steps to prevent individuals at risk from being radicalized and becoming violent."</i></p> <p>There were 11 domestic violent extremism incidents in 2020 in Oregon, according to the report. A majority of the 2020 incidents were associated with the near nightly protests and riots in Portland, including the night a Donald Trump supporter was shot and killed by a counter-protester. The report also mentions the December Oregon State Capitol building breach by "Reopen Oregon" demonstrators.</p> <p>"Oregon's risks are not theoretical, they're actual risks that we're facing," Kip Memmott, the audits director for the secretary of state's office, said.</p> <p>The report says Oregon is one of only 16 states that does not have any legislation defining or criminalizing domestic terrorism or domestic violent extremism at the state level.</p> <p>"I'm surprised it's not higher on the list, actually," Randy Blazak, a sociologist and expert in extremism, said. "We have a long history of extremist groups in the state. There is an ideology in Oregon that we are kind of separate from the rest of the country, so we are a hotbed for white supremacist groups and militia groups."</p> <p>Blazak pointed out the 2016 incident in Harney County when a group of far-right extremists took over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. That incident is listed as a significant event in the report, as is a 1984 incident with the Rajneesh group who intentionally gave hundreds of people salmonella in an attempt to cut back on voter turnout.</p> <p>The report also found the Oregon Homeland Security council can do more to focus on domestic violent extremism by establishing a specific statewide strategy for countering violent extremism risks.</p>

	Identifying individuals at risk of becoming violent is critical to threat management, according to the secretary of state's office. However, current law enforcement and state employee training is limited, the report says.
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HEADLINE	03/31 Canada extends anti-ISIL mission in Iraq
SOURCE	https://lethbridgenewsnow.com/2022/03/31/canadas-extends-anti-islamic-state-mission-in-iraq-to-2023/
GIST	<p>OTTAWA — Canada is extending its military mission in Iraq and the Middle East.</p> <p>Defence Minister Anita Anand announced the 12-month extension today, just hours before the current mandate was set to expire.</p> <p>Canada has steadily reduced its military footprint in the region as the focus has shifted from defeating the militant group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant to countering Iran's growing influence.</p> <p>The Canadian Armed Forces, which first deployed troops to Iraq in October 2014 as ISIL threatened to take over the country and neighbouring Syria, previously had a high of more than 800 soldiers in the region.</p> <p>The Canadian mission at different times included fighter jets, transport and surveillance aircraft and helicopters, as well as military trainers and special forces troops working alongside Kurdish and Iraqi forces as they fought ISIL.</p> <p>But the mission has since shrunk in size and prominence as concerns about ISIL have been replaced with fears about Iran's growing influence in Iraq and the region, and as other crises and threats such as Russia, China and the COVID-19 pandemic have emerged.</p> <p>In February, Canada had about 300 Armed Forces members assigned to what is known as Operation Impact, with about 250 intelligence, logistics and command staff in Kuwait, 50 trainers in Jordan and Lebanon, and only a handful of troops in Iraq.</p> <p>This report by The Canadian Press was first published March 31, 2022.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Taliban want to control aid funds
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-taliban-want-to-control-aid-funds-a-red-line-for-donors-11648735574?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>KABUL— The Taliban are asserting control over nongovernmental organizations working in Afghanistan, demanding a greater say over who receives aid and the staff NGOs hire, jeopardizing lifesaving deliveries to the Afghan population.</p> <p>At stake are the billions of dollars in aid money the international community has committed to Afghanistan since August, when the Taliban took control of the country and the economy nosedived. The Taliban government has publicly said it is committed to allowing NGOs deliver assistance to those who need it. But in practice, the Taliban are increasingly interfering with the ability of humanitarian organizations to operate independently, according to humanitarian organizations, foreign officials and documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.</p> <p>Above all, through a series of formal and informal orders, the Taliban—who have little revenue of their own—are trying to determine how aid money is spent.</p> <p>The Taliban's grab for more influence over humanitarian organizations comes ahead of a big donor conference on Thursday, where the United Nations is hoping to raise \$4.4 billion in aid for Afghanistan,</p>

its largest single-country appeal ever. Since the Taliban takeover last August, millions of people have fallen into extreme poverty, with 95% of Afghans not getting enough to eat, according to the U.N.

Earlier this week, a directive from Prime Minister Mullah Hassan Akhund was distributed among foreign aid agencies, saying that humanitarian projects must be implemented in close coordination with authorities in Kabul. The directive added to concerns among aid agencies that the Taliban are trying to control their work and who it benefits.

“This is very concerning for foreign organizations,” said Jared Rowell, country director in Kabul for the Danish Refugee Council in Kabul, an aid agency. If NGOs were to fully follow the Taliban’s directives, “we would be violating our principles of impartiality and neutrality,” he said.

How aggressively the Taliban try to impose their authority varies in different parts of Afghanistan, depending on who is in charge locally. Last week, the governor of the central province of Ghor tried to assert full control over NGOs working locally. He demanded NGOs relinquish control of their funds and implement projects of the local government’s choice, according to people familiar with the order. The governor also instructed NGOs to recruit staff selected by local authorities.

When local organizations resisted, the Taliban detained at least four Afghan aid workers for two days on allegations of corruption last week. They were released after coordinated pressure from NGOs in Kabul. After those discussions, the governor’s orders were temporarily put on hold.

Humanitarian workers fear that what happened in Ghor will happen elsewhere. In Kabul, the Taliban government earlier this year formulated a policy framework called the “Monitoring and Control Plan of NGOs.” If implemented fully, the plan would essentially turn NGOs into quasi-government agencies, allowing the government to review and approve their activities, according to a draft of the plan.

While the plan hasn’t been formally approved, NGOs say the Taliban have already stepped up efforts to control their work. Foreign aid organizations in Kabul say the Taliban want more oversight over what staff they hire to work in the field and closer coordination of aid projects. The Taliban also want to be present when organizations assess beneficiaries, which would violate their privacy. They have also tried to influence who gets aid—at times trying to redirect assistance to people more loyal to them, including families of Taliban soldiers.

In an interview, Achim Steiner, head of the U.N. Development Programme, said the Taliban’s pressure on NGOs was concerning. The ability of humanitarian agencies to operate independently and freely remains an issue of “top priority” for the U.N., he said. “It is critical, particularly in contested or conflict situations and countries, to be able to deliver humanitarian support without interference,” he added.

Taliban attempts to exert more influence over foreign organizations in the country amplify a dilemma facing the U.S. and its European partners since the Islamist movement toppled the Western-backed republic in August: how to assist the Afghan people without propping up the Taliban.

International donors and the U.N. overwhelmingly rely on NGOs to implement humanitarian projects. Many donors want to help Afghans but don’t want funds to flow through the Taliban. Humanitarian organizations also worry that they could run afoul of international sanctions if funds flow through the Taliban.

“It’s like swimming in high water, and they’re asking us not to get wet,” said Victor Moses, country director for the humanitarian organization CARE in Kabul.

Taliban interference isn’t the only obstacle. U.S. and U.N. sanctions targeting the Taliban leadership make it difficult to get money into the country. Although humanitarian organizations are exempted from sanctions, international banks remain reluctant to carry out transactions with Afghanistan. That is forcing some NGOs to find other ways of bringing funds to the country, such as through the centuries-old hawala system, an informal network of money traders.

	<p>Foreign aid organizations are also under pressure to stand up for humanitarian principles and values, such as ensuring better opportunities for Afghan women. The Taliban have sought to impose their interpretation of Islamic gender segregation rules on NGO workers, requiring local male and female staff members to work in separate offices.</p> <p>Some local female staff members of international NGOs criticize their foreign employers for kowtowing to conservative Islamic rules.</p> <p>“Why are you complying with the rules of the Taliban?” said one female employee of a foreign aid organization, which had told female employees to wear long, black dresses, banned them from leaving the office during their lunch break—unlike male colleagues—and separated employees by gender at the office.</p> <p>”If tomorrow the Taliban tell you not to promote women to managers or senior roles, will you also accept that?”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 ISIS hostages forced to fight each other
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/islamic-state-hostages-were-forced-to-fight-each-other-us-court-hears
GIST	<p>Aid workers and journalists taken hostage in Syria by a group of British Islamic State militants were forced to fight each other until they passed out, a US court has heard.</p> <p>The group of three British men, nicknamed “the Beatles” by their captives, took more than 20 westerners hostage at the height of IS’s reign of terror between 2012 and 2015. El Shafee Elsheikh is on trial in Virginia, with prosecutors alleging he was the member nicknamed Ringo by the hostages.</p> <p>The Italian-born aid worker Federico Motka, who grew up in the UK, told the federal courthouse that he and David Haines, a British fellow aid worker, were made to fight John Cantlie, a British war correspondent and photographer, and the American journalist James Foley, in what the militant group called a “royal rumble”.</p> <p>“They were super excited about it,” Motka, who suffered 14 months of brutality at the hands of his IS kidnappers, told the court on Thursday. “We were so weak and shattered we could barely lift our arms.”</p> <p>He added that the trio humiliated them further by providing mock commentary of their forced fight, the Daily Telegraph reported.</p> <p>The hostages were told that the losers of the fight, which took place during the summer of 2013 when they were being held captive at a facility referred to as “the box”, would be waterboarded, the Associated Press reported.</p> <p>Foley and Cantlie passed out during the hour-long fight, Motka said. The group deemed the Italian the loser but never waterboarded him, inflicting a beating instead. Motka testified the trio’s individual preferences for torture.</p> <p>“George was more into boxing,” Motka testified. “John, he kicked a lot. Ringo used to talk how he liked wrestling. He would put people in headlocks.”</p> <p>Motka, who was surveying the needs of refugee camps in March 2013 when he and Haines were captured, is the first surviving hostage to testify at Elsheikh’s trial.</p> <p>“They said I was a posh wanker because I went to boarding school,” Motka testified. “They said I was arrogant, and they were going to take me down a peg.”</p>

The phrase “posh wanker” reportedly prompted a moment of uncomfortable laughter in the court, when the judge stepped in to ask what the phrase means, forcing Motka to explain the term’s meaning.

Motka said he and the other hostages endured a lengthy “regime of punishment” when held at the site, including frequent beatings and forced stress positions.

“They played lots of games with us,” Motka said. “They gave us dog names. We needed to come and immediately respond.”

He recounted how, in late 2013 and early 2014, the hostages were made to wear orange jumpsuits, as the group wanted them to replicate the “conditions to the detainees at Guantánamo Bay”.

Motka also testified he was waterboarded and electrocuted with a stun gun through a hatch in his cell “until my hands went rigid”. He was not released until 25 May 2014.

The UK and US do not pay terrorist organisations for the release of hostages, which led to the executions of Haines, the British aid worker Alan Henning and four Americans named in Elsheikh’s indictment – Foley, Steven Sotloff, Kayla Mueller and Peter Kassig. He is accused of involvement in their murder.

In opening statements, prosecutors referenced three British nationals; Elsheikh, his longtime friend Alexandra Kotey, and Mohammed Emwazi, who frequently carried out the role of executioner and was known as “Jihadi John”.

Emwazi was killed in a drone strike, while Kotey was captured alongside Elsheikh and also brought to Virginia to face trial. Kotey pleaded guilty last year in a plea bargain.

Elsheikh’s defence lawyer Edward MacMahon said there was “no dispute” about the horror of the captives’ fate.

But, he said, while there was “no doubt” that Elsheikh had gone to Syria and fought with IS, there also was no evidence he was one of the “Beatles”.

The trial continues.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Israel aims to stem rising tide of terrorism
SOURCE	https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-702782
GIST	<p>The joint operation by Israeli security forces to stem the rising tide of terrorist attacks has been dubbed 'Wave Breaker' hours after IDF troops exchanged gunfire with terrorists in Jenin and a stabbing attack occurred on a bus in Gush Etzion on Thursday.</p> <p>Jenin Clashes</p> <p>One IDF soldier was lightly injured and three Palestinian gunmen were reportedly killed in an exchange of gunfire with Palestinian gunmen in Jenin Thursday morning. The wounded IDF soldier was taken to a hospital to receive medical treatment.</p> <p>IDF and Border Police had entered the city to arrest suspects in connection to the Bnei Brak terror attack and three Palestinians were killed, Israeli media reported.</p> <p>At the same time, IDF soldiers arrested three suspects in Yabed on suspicion of involvement in the attack. They also seized multiple weapons.</p> <p>Gush Etzion Terror Attack</p> <p>"The terrorist used a screwdriver in order to carry out the stabbing," a police spokesperson said.</p> <p>"We bought a gun today because of the situation. We put the bullets in the cartridge while driving, and then there was the attack," an eyewitness told Israel Hayom's Hanan Greenwood.</p>

"I salute the armed citizen who killed the terrorist in a bus stabbing in Gush Etzion and saved lives. Israel is under terrorist attack, this is the only way to neutralize terrorists as quickly as possible and save lives," MK Nir Barkat said on Twitter. "I call on the government to adopt the bill I submitted and to allow the IDF combat reservists to obtain a weapons license to fight terrorism."

On Wednesday, [Prime Minister Naftali Bennett](#) called on those with gun licenses to begin carrying their firearm.

"A 20-year-old was stabbed in his upper body and was evacuated to Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem. There are victims being treated for shock (PTSD) at the scene," Magen David Adom (MDA) Director-General Eli Bin reported. The hospital later said that the casualty was stable, but in critical condition and sedated.

Several hours after the stabbing attack in Gush Etzion, the IDF entered Tarkumiya near Hebron, the town where the terrorist's family lives.

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorist group has gone into a state of organization-wide operational readiness following Thursday's attacks.

"Based on the decision of the Secretary-General, the Mujahid Commander Ziad al-Nakhala, we announce the raising of full readiness among our fighters in all military formations," The military spokesman for the PIJ's Al-Quds Brigades, Abu Hamza said.

11 Israelis have been killed in terrorist attacks over the last two weeks. Bennett warned on Wednesday that Israel was entering into a period of rising terrorist activity.

"Citizens of Israel, we are currently experiencing a wave of murderous terrorism and, just like in all the previous waves, we will prevail together," Bennett said. "In the last 24 hours, the security establishment has been acting with full force to restore security to Israel's cities and a feeling of security for you, the citizens."

Bnei Brak Terror Attack

Five people were killed by a Palestinian terrorist in a shooting attack in the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) city of Bnei Brak on Tuesday night. The shooter was shot dead by a police officer who arrived at the scene on a motorcycle and later succumbed to his wounds, becoming the fifth victim.

Sgt.-Maj. Amir Huri, who was killed while charging the terrorist, was laid to rest in Nazareth on Thursday. Hundreds of people attended the memorial ceremony for Huri.

Huri "saved lives and many souls in his death," his father Jiris said. "People have called us from all parts of the country. I feel like the whole nation is embracing us. Thank you to all the people of Israel."

"I received the terrible news while I was in class," said Huri's cousin, Sahar. "At first, I was in denial. I didn't want to believe it, and I told myself that surely, it isn't him because there are many people with his name."

Hadera Terror Attack

On Sunday, Two ISIS-affiliated Arab-Israeli terrorists from Umm el-Fahm killed two Border Police officers and injured twelve others in [Hadera](#). Both were killed by police officers who had been near the scene of the attack.

The Hadera attack was the second such terrorist attack attributed to ISIS affiliates. Four Israelis were killed on March 22 in a terrorist stabbing attack at a shopping center and gas station in [Beersheba](#) by a Bedouin-Israeli who had previously been arrested for promoting terrorism.

On Thursday, the municipality of Umm el-Fahm posted a message of condolences to the family of the terrorist on Facebook. An hour later, the post was removed.

Beersheba Terror Attack

Beersheba was the third stabbing attack that week and the first successful terrorist attack in the current wave of terrorism.

Hamas Political Bureau member Husam Badran said on Thursday that the recent attacks proved that Israel "is unable to protect itself despite all the capabilities it possesses." He also said that there was popular support for the attacks.

Tensions began to rise prior to the Ramadan period as terrorist organizations and Palestinian civil groups increased in violent rhetoric and threats.

Palestinian Authority officials said on March 13 that entry by Jews on the Temple Mount during Jewish holidays would trigger a "religious war."

Hamas said in a statement on Wednesday that "the resistance has its hand on the trigger and is ready to repeat the Sword of Jerusalem," referencing the Hamas name for the previous Gaza conflagration.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Wave of violence: attacks rock Israel
SOURCE	https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-march-31/
GIST	<p>Bottom Line Up Front</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A wave of terrorist attacks has rocked Israel over the past several weeks, leaving 11 dead and many more injured as the country grapples with its most serious terror threat in years.• Two terror attacks this week in Israel were perpetrated by Arab Israelis with alleged links to the Islamic State (ISIS).• Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet released a video in which he promised a strong response, taking note of the violence perpetrated by "those who want to hurt us at any price" due to "hatred of Jews, of the State of Israel."• With tensions high, the security forces were on alert, given the forthcoming Ramadan holiday, as well as a recent summit hosted by Israel and attended by the signatories of the Abraham Accords, Egypt, and the U.S. <p>A wave of terrorist attacks has rocked Israel over the past several weeks, leaving 11 dead and many more injured as the country grapples with its most serious terror threat in years. Five attacks over two weeks have led Israel to boost security, augmenting counterterrorism forces throughout the country focused closely on deterring future attacks and restoring a sense of calm. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) deployed troops to the occupied West Bank in an attempt to quell further attacks. The most recent attack occurred in Bnei Brak, an ultra-orthodox suburb just outside of eastern Tel Aviv on Tuesday night, when a Palestinian gunman opened fire killing five. The terrorist was neutralized by police, but the string of attacks has led many Israelis to wonder if this is the beginning of a new intifada, or uprising. Hamas praised the attack, although no group has yet claimed responsibility.</p> <p>Two other attacks were perpetrated by Arab Israelis with alleged links to the Islamic State (ISIS). The ISIS angle is of note, because jihadist groups have long sought to penetrate Israel to conduct attacks or coopt and radicalize Arab Israelis to commit acts of terrorist violence, efforts which have been met with little success. While much jihadist propaganda focuses on Israel, it has been extremely difficult for groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS to follow through on their threats. Israel's primary security threats come from other terrorist groups, including Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah. But with ISIS's leader Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi being killed after a U.S. Special Forces raid in early February, the group may be looking to launch attacks in Israel as a way of generating momentum, demonstrating to ISIS followers that the group retains the capability to mount spectacular attacks, even in its diminished state. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett released a video in which he condemned the attacks and promised a strong response, while</p>

also taking note of the violence perpetrated by “those who want to hurt us at any price” due to their “hatred of Jews, of the State of Israel.”

As Israel’s new prime minister, Bennett is also facing pressure to ensure that the state’s response is adequate and effectively eliminates the threat, particularly if there is an active ISIS sleeper cell planning further attacks. ISIS claimed an attack from last Sunday near the Israeli city of Hadera, in which gunmen killed two Israelis and wounded several others. The other ISIS-related attack, which killed four and seriously wounded several others, occurred in Beersheba, located in southern Israel, last Tuesday by a terrorist “known to the security services.” The terrorist responsible for the Beersheba attack had previously confessed in 2015 to supporting ISIS, organizing meetings of supporters and planning to travel to Syria, before being jailed for four years. He was released in 2019.

With tensions high, the security forces were on high alert, given the forthcoming Ramadan holiday—unfortunately a frequent time of increased inter-communal tension—as well as a recent summit hosted by Israel and attended by the signatories of the [Abraham Accords](#) (i.e. Bahrain, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates), as well as Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. A Hamas official claimed that the recent wave of attacks was a result of what he called the “summit of shame and disgrace held in the Negev.” Equally important to highlight among human security impacts in the locale are reports by the UN humanitarian agency (OCHA) that, so far in 2022 (through March 21), 18 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces, and 222 Palestinians have been injured by Israeli forces in Gaza and the West Bank. Broadening to the current global security context, the recent attacks in Israel have received less media attention than normal due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, following Russia’s unprovoked invasion in late February. Several high-profile terrorist and militant groups have criticized Abraham Accord signatories for “selling out” the Palestinians, mocking the leaders of Arab states that have engaged in diplomatic relations while the Palestinian people remain without sovereign, independent statehood.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Pakistani Taliban Ramadan offensive
SOURCE	https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/03/31/pakistani-taliban-ramadan-offensive/
GIST	<p>The Pakistani Taliban on Wednesday announced it would launch a Ramadan offensive against security forces, after claiming an attack which the military said killed at least six of its soldiers.</p> <p>The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a separate movement that shares common roots with the militants that took power in Afghanistan last year, have stepped up attacks in recent months.</p> <p>The government held a series of talks with the militants late last year before an agreed truce collapsed.</p> <p>The spring offensive will begin on the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, starting on Sunday or Monday, and will target security forces and their collaborators, Mohammad Khorasani, spokesman for TTP militant group said in a statement.</p> <p>“This operation will include martyrdom (suicide) operations, ambush attacks, mine operations, counter-attacks, target attacks, laser and sniper operations,” he added.</p> <p>The TTP are pressuring the government to allow militants to return to their hometowns with impunity after foreign fighters were told by the Afghan Taliban to leave Afghanistan.</p> <p>A spring offensive is a rare move by the TTP.</p> <p>It comes after the country’s armed forces said militants attempted to storm a compound in the border region near Afghanistan, killing at least six Pakistani troops.</p> <p>The attack was claimed by TTP, who said they had killed or wounded more than 30 soldiers.</p>

	<p>The militants often exaggerate their gains, while the military's public relations department also plays down losses or delays reporting them.</p> <p>The announcement came as Prime Minister Imran Khan was facing a no-confidence vote — the biggest challenge to his power since becoming leader in 2018.</p> <p>Pakistan's restive border region has long been a stronghold for groups such as the TTP, which operates across the porous boundary with Afghanistan.</p> <p>The group plunged the country into a period of horrific violence after forming in 2007, before a major crackdown in 2014 forced them into hiding across the border.</p> <p>But since the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the local group has become emboldened and carried out dozens of such attacks on Pakistan's soil.</p> <p>The TTP and Islamabad agreed to a truce in November.</p> <p>But it failed on December 10, with the hardliners accusing the government of violating the terms of the truce.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/30 Militants attack troops northwest Pakistan
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-pakistan-taliban-peshawar-661aea388ca4610144f9b1123ccef03f?utm_source=iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=3988262
GIST	<p>PESHAWAR, Pakistan (AP) — Militants attacked Pakistan's paramilitary security forces in the country's northwest early on Wednesday, triggering a shootout in which at least six troops and three insurgents were killed, the military and police said.</p> <p>Spokesman Mohammad Khurasani of the Pakistani Taliban — also known as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP, an outlawed militant group — claimed responsibility for the attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.</p> <p>Local police official Zahid Khan said about two dozen security personnel were also wounded in the attack, but that the paramilitary forces had apparently taken control of the situation. In a statement, the military said troops retaliated after coming under attack and killed all three insurgents involved in the assault.</p> <p>The Pakistani Taliban have been emboldened since the Afghan Taliban last year seized power across the border in Afghanistan. They have stepped up attacks on Pakistani security forces since December when a month-long cease-fire between the TTP and the government ended.</p> <p>Pakistani authorities say most of the fighters and leaders of the TTP are hiding in Afghanistan.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	03/31 Complete human genome sequenced
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3v4y7/complete-human-genome-sequenced-for-first-time-in-major-breakthrough
GIST	<p>Scientists have mapped an entire unbroken human genome for the first time, a milestone that completes the groundbreaking work started by the Human Genome Project decades ago, according to a motherlode of new studies published in Science and other journals on Thursday.</p>

The final stubborn gaps of the genome, representing about eight percent of this human blueprint, were filled by the Telomere to Telomere (T2T) consortium, an international team consisting of dozens of scientists. The achievement opens the door to a host of new discoveries about the genetic variation between people, the evolution of our species, and the treatment of genetic diseases.

“Hallelujah, we have finally finished one human genome,” said Evan Eichler, a professor and Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator in the Department of Genome Sciences at the University of Washington School of Medicine, in a press briefing about the breakthrough on Thursday.

“The best is yet to come,” added Eichler, who serves as co-chair of the T2T consortium. “No one should see this as the end. It is the beginning, I think, of transformation, not only for genomic research, but for clinical medicine, although that will take years to achieve.”

Genomes are the language of life, written inside the cells of all living things in four letters (A, C, G, and T) that represent fundamental units of DNA called bases, which in turn combine into two base pairs.

When the Human Genome Project revealed the first draft of a human genome in 2001, it was hailed as one of the biggest advances in modern science. Though the project was undoubtedly a giant leap forward in genomics, it only deciphered the so-called “euchromatin” part of the genome, which makes up about 92 percent of the roughly three billion base pairs (or six billion bases) that make us human.

The remaining eight percent, called heterochromatin, turned out to be a much tougher nut to crack because its DNA sequences are so repetitive, making it difficult to untangle them into the correct order. For this reason, heterochromatic regions have sometimes been dismissed as “junk DNA,” a characterization that the new batch of studies emphatically rejects.

“It turns out that these genes are incredibly important for adaptation,” Eichler said. “They contain immune response genes that help us to adapt and survive infections and plagues and viruses. They contain genes that are important in terms of helping us detoxify agents and they are very important in terms of predicting drug response.”

“But perhaps most interesting to me is they carry genes that make us uniquely human,” he continued. “About half of the genes that are thought to make our bigger brain, compared to the other apes, come specifically from these regions, which were absent in the original Human Genome Project. So for me, it's like a dream come true.”

The comprehensive results fill in the terra incognita of human chromosomes, which are structures inside the cell nucleus that preserve genetic information. Heterochromatic sequences that make up centromeres, a part of the chromosome that serves as a link during cell division, have been exposed for the first time. The T2T consortium has also decoded the short structural “arms” on five of the 23 chromosomes in a human genome (chromosomes 13, 14, 15, 21, and 23).

Even though heterochromatic DNA makes up less than a tenth of the genome, it took researchers almost twice as long to assemble these final painstaking lines, compared to the initial mapping of the euchromatic regions that make up the vast majority of our code. Filling in the missing links of the chain required the development of next-generation laboratory tools, more robust computational methods, and a new generation of genetic research leaders.

“The reason that I'm here today is because I was mystified that parts of our genome are organized in this way,” said Karen Miga, an assistant professor in the Biomolecular Engineering Department at UC Santa Cruz and a co-lead of T2T, in the press briefing. “Why critical functions for our cell are placed over these very uniquely structured regions was very fascinating to me.”

“This is a key genomic feature,” she added. “You can go to plants, insects, and other mammals—the genomic feature is organized in this way.”

	<p>This first truly complete genome was not sourced from a living human, but rather a special type of embryo-turned-tumor, called a hydatidiform mole, that was provided by an anonymous woman of European descent about 20 years ago. Whereas living humans inherit two different genomes from their mother and father, a hydatidiform mole rejects its maternal blueprint and duplicates its paternal genome, making it non-viable.</p> <p>Working with just one version of the genome simplified the process of mapping out the remaining euchromatic genes, though the researchers acknowledged the limitations of working with one specific ancestral heritage. To get a better read on the incredible diversity of humans, the T24 consortium is partnering with the Human Pangenome Reference Consortium to fully map genomes from different lineages that will reveal, in unprecedented detail, how all humans are related to each other.</p> <p>Eric Green, the director of the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) at the U.S. The National Institutes of Health (NIH), called the new studies a “remarkable achievement.”</p> <p>“These publications might be considered the long-awaited closing ceremony, or perhaps the encore, to the incredibly audacious [Human Genome Project], which at the time determined as much of the human genome sequence as was possible with the tools in hand at the time,” he said in the briefing. “Scientists inspired by that initial endeavor have now finished what I, and other members of the Human Genome Project, started. We have come full circle.”</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Europe faces future of extreme droughts
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/apr/01/europe-faces-a-future-of-extreme-droughts
GIST	<p>Summer 2018 was devastating for European farmers. Rainfall levels across much of central Europe were up to 80% less than normal, and temperatures soared to record-breaking levels. Wildfires broke out in Nordic countries and across much of the European continent crops produced their lowest yields in decades.</p> <p>But this wasn’t the end of it. Parched conditions and soaring temperatures returned to much of Europe in summer 2019 and 2020 too. Now a new study reveals that this multi-year drought has set a new benchmark, gaining itself the unwelcome crown of being the most intense drought event for Europe in the past 250 years.</p> <p>Poring over climate records dating back to 1766, researchers discovered that the 2018 to 2020 European drought was unprecedented in its intensity, covering more than one-third of the continent for more than two years. Using climate model simulations the researchers show that Europe needs to brace itself for increasingly long and similarly intense droughts, persisting for as long as eight years under the intermediate emissions scenario and a terrifying 25 years in the worst-case scenario. Mitigation and adaptation measures are going to be crucial.</p> <p>“The 2018–2020 drought event could be considered as a wake-up call on agricultural policies,” the researchers write in their paper published in the journal Earth’s Future.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 South: latest NKorea ICBM launch a ruse
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/asia/north-korea-icbm-fake.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>SEOUL — When North Korea conducted its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile test to date last week, it said it launched the Hwasong-17, its newest and biggest ICBM. In a propaganda blitz, the country’s state media released a Hollywood-style video of its leader, Kim Jong-un, personally guiding the test launch in a sleek leather jacket and sunglasses at Pyongyang International Airport.</p> <p>South Korea now says it may have been a ruse.</p>

In a report to the National Assembly on Tuesday, the South Korean Defense Ministry endorsed what some analysts had already suspected: North Korea actually fired [its older Hwasong-15 ICBM](#) — which was tested in 2017 — and exaggerated Mr. Kim’s weapons achievements by falsely claiming a successful Hwasong-17 launch.

Mr. Kim badly [needs](#) to strengthen his diplomatic leverage with the United States and South Korea, and a successful new launch may have helped. But more important, South Korean officials said, Mr. Kim used the launch and a crude, fake presentation of video and photos to demonstrate his infallible leadership to the long-suffering people of North Korea.

The country will celebrate the 110th birthday of Kim Il-sung, Mr. Kim’s grandfather and North Korea’s founder, next month. With his economy [hobbled by international sanctions and the pandemic](#), Mr. Kim has often used such occasions to focus on his growing nuclear capabilities and to show off his power.

“We suspect the latest launch had more to do with domestic considerations,” the Defense Ministry said in its parliamentary report.

When North Korea first unveiled the Hwasong-17 during a military parade in October 2020, it appeared to be the largest mobile-launcher ICBM the world had ever seen. Some analysts suspected that, unlike the Hwasong-15, which is built to carry a single warhead, the Hwasong-17 appeared to be designed to carry multiple nuclear warheads. A successful launch would have marked a significant milestone in North Korea’s ICBM program.

North Korea [began testing the Hwasong-17](#) this year. On [Feb. 27](#) and [March 5](#), it tested the missile’s first-stage booster rocket and other components, but not at full range. In its third test, [conducted on March 16](#), something went wrong, and the rocket exploded in the sky near Pyongyang, the capital, shortly after liftoff.

“The explosion was visible to the naked eye, as its debris rained down through the sky over Pyongyang,” Ha Tae-keung, a South Korean lawmaker, told reporters this week. “Pyongyang citizens were shocked, and it could even have led to some instability.” South Korean officials said Mr. Kim likely used the successful test flight of the Hwasong-15 disguised as the Hwasong-17 on March 24 as damage control.

“Now that Pyongyang citizens had witnessed the failure, they needed to send a message of success and do so quickly in order to prevent rumors from spreading and to ensure regime stability,” the Defense Ministry said in its parliamentary report. “So they launched a Hwasong-15 model whose reliability had been confirmed through a test in 2017.”

The Hwasong-17 is bigger and longer than the Hwasong-15. Its first-stage booster rocket has four nozzles, while the Hwasong-15 has only two. But Mr. Kim’s propagandists edited and combined video footage and photos from the earlier Hwasong-17 tests with those from the Hwasong-15 last Thursday, creating the illusion of a successful Hwasong-17 launch, South Korean officials said.

While unsuspecting North Koreans may have been fooled, the alleged fakery did not escape the scrutiny of South Korean defense officials and private analysts.

The weather around Pyongyang last Thursday was overcast, but some photos of the test released by North Korean media showed a fine and clear day. The test took place in the afternoon, but in some photos and video footage, the shadow of Mr. Kim at the test site suggests that he was inspecting a test in the morning. (All three previous Hwasong-17 tests, including the one that failed, took place in the morning.)

The engine burn time and trajectory data from the test also hinted at a Hwasong-15 rather than the Hwasong-17, South Korean officials said. And lastly, satellite and other data indicated that the missile had two nozzles, not four, officials said.

With no free news media allowed in North Korea, it is extremely difficult to verify official claims independently. When North Korea conducts a weapons test like the one last Thursday, outside analysts have few sources of information other than North Korean state media and a small amount of data released from Seoul or Tokyo. And in North Korea, propaganda routinely trumps the truth.

Still, it is unusual for the South Korean military to dispute a North Korean claim so publicly and with so much detail. Some analysts say the South Korean military has a history of downplaying the power of its Northern rival.

The South Korean military may also have been particularly upset by the launch because it came in the [middle of a rocky presidential transition in Seoul](#): President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol told the Defense Ministry to move out of its current location so he could use it for his presidential office after his inauguration on May 10.

Hwasong-17 or not, the North's latest missile launch still violated U.N. resolutions and [the country's self-imposed moratorium](#) on ICBM tests. It also demonstrated significant technological advances. The missile soared 3,852 miles into space, compared with an altitude of 2,796 miles that the Hwasong-15 achieved in its last test in November 2017.

The main question appears to be whether the weapon was an improved and more powerful version of the Hwasong-15 or the same Hwasong-15 equipped with more fuel and a lighter payload allowing it to fly higher.

"We should not pay too much attention to whether this was a Hwasong-15 or 17," [said Kim Dong-yup](#), an expert on the North Korean military at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul. "I don't think you can generate such flight data by just reducing the payload or using a little more fuel. This clearly marks a technological advance."

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HEADLINE	03/31 Census bares secrets of 1950
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/us/census-data-1950.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — At 12:01 a.m. on Friday, precisely 72 years after enumerators began knocking on the doors of some 46 million American houses and apartments, the federal government will make public what they learned: the ages, incomes, addresses, ancestry and a trove of other facts about the 150.7 million people who were counted in the 1950 census.</p> <p>Those millions of census forms, painstakingly filled out by hand in ink, will be posted online by the National Archives and Records Administration, which by law has kept them private until now. The records, searchable by name and address, will offer an intimate look at a nation on the cusp of the modern era — for the merely curious, a glimpse of the life parents or grandparents led, but for historians and genealogists, a once-in-a-decade bonanza of secrets unveiled.</p> <p>"This is the Super Bowl and the Olympics combined, and it's only every 10 years — it's awesome stuff," Matt Menashes, the executive director of the National Genealogical Society, said in an interview. "What's so great about these points of data is that it helps you paint a picture — not just relationships, but what society was like."</p> <p>The last release of similar data was in 2012, when the National Archives made details of the 1940 census public. The government has imposed a 72-year ban on the release of census records since 1952, when the Census Bureau turned over to the National Archives all the data it had collected since the first census in 1790.</p> <p>The searchable data being released includes not just census forms, but also counts of Native Americans who were tallied on separate Indian Reservation Schedules.</p>

The [broad outlines of the 1950 census results](#) have long been public, of course, reflecting the burst of economic and population expansion in a nation flush with optimism after victory in World War II. The United States had grown by nearly 15 percent in just one decade, and nearly one in 10 people lived in New York. Nevada, with just 160,000 residents, was the least populous state.

The baby boom was in full swing: 3.6 million children were born that year, some 18,000 more than in 2020, when the nation's population was more than twice as large. The average family [earned \\$3,300](#) — about \$38,800 in 2022 dollars.

It was a time when gasoline cost 18 cents a gallon. Interstate highways were but a gleam in future President Eisenhower's eye. Milton Berle's "Texaco Star Theater" was such a [runaway television hit](#) that movie houses closed for lack of business during its Tuesday evening time slot, even though fewer than one in 10 households even owned a television.

About 140,000 census-takers, or enumerators, fanned out across the country that April for what would be the last complete house-to-house canvass; the next census in 1960 was conducted largely by mail.

Compared to the [nine questions](#) asked in the 2020 head count, the 1950 list was exhaustive — up to [38 questions](#), from mundane queries about age, sex and race to deeper dives into people's occupations, incomes, military status, education and ancestry. Married women were asked how many children they had borne, and children born between January and April of 1950 were [tallied on special "infant cards"](#) — another 17 questions long.

The infant cards were not retained. But answers from the census forms were coded onto punch cards and tabulated, for the first time ever, on a UNIVAC I computer, 16,000 pounds and 5,000 vacuum tubes of calculating muscle. Then the census forms were photographed, transferred to nearly 6,400 microfilm rolls and shipped to the National Archives for a 72-year rest.

The rolls contain only the front side of the census forms. The reverse, which held answers to a litany of questions about the condition of places where respondents lived, were not preserved.

The images being released on Friday are digitized versions of the microfilm records that have been scanned with special optical character recognition software to locate and translate handwritten names and addresses into searchable text. Mistakes are inevitable, and the National Archives is asking [those who view the forms to report errors](#).

Leading genealogical groups, however, are not waiting for corrections to trickle in. The for-profit genealogical firm Ancestry.com plans to immediately download and scan the census forms using its own character-recognition software. Then [Family Search](#), a nonprofit group sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, intends to marshal volunteers to inspect and correct the results, a process that is likely to take several months.

"We have about 400,000 volunteers that index records all the time," said David E. Rencher, the chief genealogical officer at Family Search. "For a project like this, where we rally the community, we'll get a bump, probably several hundred thousand, just to do this."

That army is but one indicator of the national fascination with tracing family histories, a passion that Mr. Menashes traces to the [1977 television mini-series "Roots,"](#) which explored the journey from enslavement to freedom of the ancestors of the author Alex Haley. The program dovetailed with the dawn of the computer era and with it, the ability to search literally billions of genealogical records online.

Experts in the field call genealogical records an important window on history. But deep down, they say, the records scratch an itch among most people to learn about their predecessors, uncover surprises and locate the occasional black sheep.

	<p>“Everybody has a natural curiosity about family history,” said Mr. Rencher. “It doesn’t mean you want to become a family historian. But there needs to be a place where you can go when you’re curious and say, ‘I wonder what my family was doing in 1950?’”</p> <p>Taneya Koonce, president of the Nashville chapter of the Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society, said she would be online early Friday looking for records of her grandparents, who lived in North Carolina. But she said the 1950 records are likely to be of special interest to many African Americans because they help document the great migration of Black families from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North.</p> <p>“The census is such an important foundational body of information to have when you’re doing family history,” she said. “You can explore what was going on in the neighborhood at the time, how much income the family was bringing in, where a person was born.”</p> <p>Mr. Menashes said the new records would provide his first look at his parents, who were young children in New York City in 1950. “For me, it’s interesting, first of all, to know their addresses,” he said. “New York’s archives have this wonderful imagery of streetscapes in the ’40s and ’50s. It’s amazing to be able to connect an address to what a place looked like.”</p> <p>And Mr. Rencher, who was adopted, said he will try to fill in blank spots about his birth family in Pennsylvania.</p> <p>“There are still things about the 1950s that are a mystery to me,” he said. “I have a half-sibling out there somewhere. Who knows?”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Oldest US active park ranger retires at 100
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/oldest-u-s-active-park-ranger-retires-at-100/
GIST	<p>RICHMOND, Calif. (AP) — The nation’s oldest active park ranger is hanging up her Smokey hat at the age of 100.</p> <p>Betty Reid Soskin retired Thursday after more than 15 years at the Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park in Richmond, California, the National Park Service announced.</p> <p>Soskin “spent her last day providing an interpretive program to the public and visiting with coworkers,” a Park Service statement said.</p> <p>She led tours at the park and museum honoring the women who worked in factories during wartime and shared her own experience as a Black woman during the conflict. She worked for the U.S. Air Force in 1942 but quit after learning that “she was employed only because her superiors believed she was white,” according to a Park Service biography.</p> <p>“Being a primary source in the sharing of that history – my history – and giving shape to a new national park has been exciting and fulfilling,” Soskin said in the Park Service statement. “It has proven to bring meaning to my final years.”</p> <p>Soskin won a temporary Park Service position at the age of 84 and became a permanent Park Service employee in 2011. She celebrated her 100th birthday last September.</p> <p>“Betty has made a profound impact on the National Park Service and the way we carry out our mission,” Director Chuck Sams said. “Her efforts remind us that we must seek out and give space for all perspectives so that we can tell a more full and inclusive history of our nation.”</p>

	<p>Soskin was born Betty Charbonnet in Detroit in 1921 but recalled surviving the devastating Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 while living with her Creole family in New Orleans, according to the Park Service biography.</p> <p>Her family then moved to Oakland, California, and Soskin remained in the San Francisco Bay Area, where in 1945 she and her first husband founded one of the first Black-owned record stores in the area, the biography said.</p> <p>She also was a civil rights activist and took part in meetings to develop a general management plan for the Home Front park. She has received several honors.</p> <p>She was named California Woman of the Year in 1995.</p> <p>In 2015, Soskin received a presidential coin from President Barack Obama after she lit the National Christmas tree at the White House.</p> <p>In June 2016, she was awakened in her home by a robber who punched her repeatedly in the face, dragged her out of her bedroom and beat her before making off with the coin and other items. Soskin, then 94, recovered and returned to work just weeks after the attack. The coin was replaced.</p> <p>Soskin also was honored with entry into the Congressional Record. Glamour Magazine named her woman of the year in 2018.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Weirdest of Wikipedia?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/style/wikipedia-instagram-depths-annie-rauwerda.html
GIST	<p>Did you know that there's a Swiss political party dedicated to opposing the use of PowerPoint? That some people believe Avril Lavigne died in 2003 and was replaced by a look-alike? Or that there's a stone in a museum in Taiwan that uncannily resembles a slab of meat?</p> <p>Probably not — unless, that is, you're one of the hundreds of thousands of people who follow @depthsofwikipedia. The Instagram account shares bizarre and surprising snippets from the vast, crowdsourced online encyclopedia, including amusing images (a chicken literally crossing a road) and minor moments in history (Mitt Romney driving several hours with his dog atop his car). Some posts are wholesome — such as Hatsuyume, the Japanese word for one's first dream of the year — while others are not safe for work (say, panda pornography).</p> <p>Annie Rauwerda, 22, started the account in the early days of the pandemic, when others were baking sourdough bread and learning how to knit. "Everyone was starting projects, and this was my project," she said.</p> <p>At the time, she was a sophomore at the University of Michigan. Students are often discouraged from using Wikipedia as a source in academic work, because most of its pages can be edited by anyone and may contain inaccurate information. But for Ms. Rauwerda, the site was always more about entertainment: spending hours clicking on one link after another, getting lost in rabbit holes.</p> <p>"Wikipedia is the best thing on the internet," Ms. Rauwerda said in a phone interview. "It's what the internet was supposed to be. It has this hacker ethos of working together and making something."</p> <p>At first, only her friends were following the account. But it received a wave of attention when Ms. Rauwerda posted about the influencer Caroline Calloway, who was upset that the post featured an old version of her Wikipedia page that said her occupation was "nothing." Ms. Rauwerda apologized, and Ms. Calloway later boosted the account on her Instagram.</p>

Ms. Rauwerda has since expanded @depthsofwikipedia to Twitter and TikTok. She sells merchandise (such as a coffee mug emblazoned with an image from the Wikipedia entry for “bisexual lighting”) and has hosted a live show in Manhattan, featuring trivia and stand-up.

Her followers often pitch her Wikipedia pages to feature, but these days it’s hard to find an entry that will impress Ms. Rauwerda. “If it’s a fun fact that’s been on the Reddit home page, I’m definitely not going to repost it,” she said. “For example, there are only 25 blimps in the world. I’ve known about that for a long time, and it went around Twitter a couple days ago. I was shocked. I was like, ‘Everyone knows this.’”

She is choosy in large part because many of her followers rely on @depthsofwikipedia for unearthing the hidden gems of the internet.

“I just love to learn stuff, especially these strange photos and things I could never find on my own,” said Gabe Hockett, 15, a high school student in Minneapolis. He said his favorite posts from the account include “[The Most Unwanted Song](#)” and the “[Dave Matthews Band Chicago River incident](#).”

Jen Fox, 22, said that trading posts from the account with her boyfriend is “a special, nerdy love language.” It’s also been a litmus test for friendships. When Ms. Fox, a copywriter, moved to San Francisco in February, she would mention the account to new people she met. If they were familiar with it, she said, “we would start DM-ing each other and sharing our favorite posts, which felt like we were really solidifying a concrete friendship.” Ms. Fox even attended a @depthsofwikipedia meet-up at a local brewery. “There’s such a community behind it,” she said.

It’s not new for lovers of Wikipedia to rally around their passion for the platform. A Facebook group called [Cool Freaks’ Wikipedia Club](#), founded eight years ago, has nearly 50,000 members who actively trade links.

Ms. Rauwerda’s account “makes the internet feel smaller,” said Heather Woods, an assistant professor of rhetoric and technology at Kansas State University. “It shortcuts the rabbit-hole phenomenon by offering attractive — or sometimes hilariously unattractive — entry points to internet culture.”

Zachary McCune, the brand director for the Wikimedia Foundation, which operates Wikipedia, said that @depthsofwikipedia is an extension of the site’s participatory ethos. “It’s a place where Wikipedia comes to life, like an after-hours tour of the best of Wikipedia,” Mr. McCune said.

And because Wikipedia has more than 55 million articles, having a guide like Ms. Rauwerda is helpful. She hopes that visitors to her page walk away with new shared knowledge. “I want you to see something that makes you pause and go, ‘Hmm, that’s interesting,’” Ms. Rauwerda said. “Something that makes you rethink the world a little bit.”

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HEADLINE	03/31 How happy Seattle and WA to cities, states?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/how-happy-are-seattle-and-wa-as-a-whole-compared-to-other-cities-and-states/
GIST	<p>By some accounts, Seattle is among the most stressed and sleep deprived metros in the nation, but let’s forget about that for a moment. New reports find Seattle, and Washington as a whole, rate high on the happiness scale.</p> <p>In fact, Seattle is the seventh-happiest city in the nation, according to WalletHub’s 2022’s Happiest Cities in America report. The personal finance website last year found that the state of Washington was the 13th-happiest in the nation.</p> <p>To determine where Americans were happiest, WalletHub compared 180 cities and all 50 states across several key indicators, including unemployment rates, job opportunities, the potential for income growth, divorce rates and sleep rates.</p>

Seattle had the lowest unemployment rate, ranked second in income growth and first in the number of people who play sports.

The state's happiness ranking was also based, in part, on the number of people who spend time volunteering for causes they believe in.

Milla Titova, a professor at the University of Washington who teaches courses on happiness, said there are a lot of reasons Seattle and Washington could fare well on lists like these.

"There are so many things going on in Seattle," she said. "You have [the Seattle Freeze](#), which is real and might go against happiness. We have gloom and we don't see the sun for months and we know that's not good for happiness."

But people in Seattle and Washington are really into the outdoors, she said.

"A lot of people here are active and we know that working out and being outdoors is good for happiness," she said.

Shep Salusky, a Seattle-based clinical psychologist who's on the UW faculty and is a member of the Washington State Psychological Association, said he's wary of these sorts of lists and finds them almost meaningless.

Studies such as these tend to rely on internet analytics and self reporting rather than rigorous and controlled scientific experiments, he said.

Where Seattle ranks in the 20 happiest cities in the U.S.

Seattle, with an overall score of 67.6, ranks 7th in the top 20. Fremont, Calif., was first with an overall score of 77.13. More than 180 of the largest U.S. cities were scored and ranked based on 30 key indicators of happiness, ranging from the depression rate to the income-growth rate to average leisure time spent per day.



MARK NOWLIN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

You could make the case that Seattle is a happy city because in comparison with much of the nation, we are relatively affluent and have a better social service safety net than many, he said.

But, he said, that's really not a correct way to measure happiness.

Salusky said there's literature going back 20 to 30 years indicating, among other things, that happiness is more than the absence of sadness.

"True happiness seems to come from being able to realistically assess your possibilities and what you can and can't have and then going out and getting it," he said.

People in less developed parts of the world often rate higher in happiness than people in the U.S. because they understand and accept what is possible, he said.

Lack of happiness occurs when people try to accomplish what simply isn't possible.

He gives body image as an example.

"Let's say someone is trying to meet a certain body image ideal, but they are going to be frustrated unless they are a model and that is going to work against their happiness," Salusky said.

"If people can say, 'I don't care about the ideals or what is expected of me. This is what I want to do and this is what I can accomplish,' they are going to be much happier."

The challenge, he said, is to "make a realistic assessment and keep going back to that." In addition, he advised using media, especially social media, for gathering information rather than assessing worth.

"Don't compare to others. Ask yourself, 'Do I have what I need? Do I have what I want?' And use that as your measure," he said.

Money can also factor into people's happiness. Several landmark studies on the connection between money and happiness have shown that having enough money for what you need decreases stress and increases happiness, said Titova.

Increases in income significantly lower stressors for people who are not making much money, she said. However, once you reach a certain level of income, the relative return in happiness from each dollar goes down, she said. When people with incomes above \$75,000 see their income increase, their small negative stressors remain unchanged, she said.

She said it's possible to increase personal satisfaction, or happiness, at just about any income level with a few very simple — but not always easy — exercises.

One, practice gratitude.

"It may seem obvious but research shows it works," she said.

Writing a shortlist of things that you're grateful for, keeping a gratitude journal, writing a gratitude letter to someone who helped you — whether you send it or not, will unfailingly lift your spirits, she said.

Another certain way to increase a sense of well-being, Titova said, is to do something for others, an idea that may seem counterintuitive at first.

"Instead of concentrating on our own happiness, focus on the happiness of others," she said. "Whether we volunteer, or do something for someone else — and it can be as simple as calling your mom if that makes her happy — our happiness goes up."

"It's kind of amazing and it works."

Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	03/31 Study: fentanyl pills seizures 50-fold rise
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fentanyl-pill-seizures-increase-study/
GIST	<p>The number of fentanyl-laced pills seized by law enforcement has increased nearly 50-fold between 2018 and 2021, according to a study published Thursday in the journal Drug and Alcohol Dependence. The rise in seizures comes amid a period of record-high overdose deaths, researchers said.</p> <p>"An increase in illicit pills containing fentanyl points to a new and increasingly dangerous period in the United States," director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse Dr. Nora D. Volkow said in a statement Thursday.</p> <p>A team of scientists compared data from the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program for the first quarter of 2018 and the last quarter of December 2021. Researchers found that the number of seizures of pills containing fentanyl increased from 68 to 635. The total number of individual pills containing fentanyl seized by law enforcement rose from 42,202 to 2,089,186 and seizures of powder containing fentanyl grew from 424 to 1,539.</p> <p>Pills represented more than a quarter of illicit fentanyl seizures by the end of 2021, the scientists said, more than double the proportion in 2018.</p> <p>Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that's around 50 times more potent than heroin, is a major driver of the recent rise in drug overdoses, the study said.</p> <p>Researchers said recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the U.S. hit a record high number in overdose deaths over the 12-month period ending in October 2021. The CDC estimated that nearly 106,000 people died from drug overdoses during that time, according to the study.</p> <p>The researchers said many of those who may seek out the drug are not aware that other drugs they're using, like heroin and cocaine, could be contaminated with fentanyl. The authors of the study said using fentanyl-laced drugs greatly increases the chance of an overdose, given that a lethal dose "may be as small as two milligrams."</p> <p>Volkow said fentanyl-laced pills are often consumed by "people who are more naïve to drug use, and who have lower tolerances."</p> <p>Researchers called for more harm reduction strategies like fentanyl test strips, drug risk education and distribution of naloxone, a drug that helps reverse overdoses.</p> <p>"For the first time we can see this rapid rise in pills adulterated with fentanyl, which raises red flags for increasing risk of harm in a population that is possibly less experienced with opioids," Dr. Joseph J. Palamar, who led the team of scientists, said in the statement. "The immediate message here is that pills illegally obtained can contain fentanyl."</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Pennsylvania: 3 officers shot, 1 dead
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lebanon-pa-police-shooting-one-dead-two-wounded/
GIST	<p>Police went to a home in the city at about 3:30 p.m. for the disturbance call. Nearly an hour later, gunfire broke out and officers radioed that they'd been hit, Capello said at a brief news conference.</p> <p>All three Lebanon City Police Department officers were taken to hospitals. One was pronounced dead. A second was in critical but stable condition and the third was in stable condition, Capello said.</p>

	<p>"This is an extremely difficult moment for everyone," she added.</p> <p>The suspect, a 34-year-old man from Lebanon, was killed in the shooting, Lebanon Police Chief Todd Breiner said.</p> <p>He was the subject of the domestic disturbance call, CBS Harrisburg, Pa. affiliate WHP-TV reports.</p> <p>"As one can imagine, it's clearly a traumatic event," Breiner said. "Our guys are strong, but we're human and we have families."</p> <p>Lebanon resident Angelo Gonzalez, 17, was working at a pizzeria down the road from the shooting when he said he saw "cop car after cop car flying down the street."</p> <p>"Then we heard something and weren't sure what it was and the street filled up with cops and ambulance in a matter of 15 min," Gonzalez said in a text message.</p> <p>The slain officer's name was being withheld pending notification of extended family members.</p> <p>Police didn't release further details.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/25 FBI: no quarterly crime statistics for 2021
SOURCE	https://time.com/6159812/fbi-crime-stats-data/
GIST	<p>Academics and other experts who track the rising and falling of crime in America were expecting on Monday to see a fresh batch of data from the FBI: quarterly aggregated crime stats (courtesy of police departments) that would offer a picture of trends across the country in 2021.</p> <p>Instead, the agency announced this week that it would not be releasing the statistics, due to a lack of data provided by local police departments.</p> <p>The agency noted that it has received data from 9,881 law enforcement agencies, out of a total of 18,818 agencies, for 2021. In order to release the data, the agency required a 60% participation rate. (The agency did make available the non-aggregated data for individual participating cities with populations over 100,000.)</p> <p>"It's a pretty arbitrary threshold because 60% is completely meaningless. It's not like 60% means the data is useful and 59% means the data is not useful," Jacob Kaplan, a criminologist at Princeton University, tells TIME.</p> <p>But behind the lack of participation is a little-noted switch in the FBI's data collecting process—and it's one that could have implications far beyond a single percentage point.</p> <p>Every year, the FBI releases its annual year-end crime report, which is based on data provided voluntarily by police departments across the country. This report typically comes out near the end of the following year. (The 2020 report, for example, came out in September of 2021.) Quarterly reports were actually a relatively new innovation, having been introduced in 2020.</p> <p>To track the numbers that police departments report, the FBI for decades used a system called the Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR) to collect data. But in 2021, the Bureau switched to a different system, called the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), which provides more details on crimes that are reported. Though the change is meant to improve tracking, this week's announcement from the FBI highlights what experts say are serious concerns about its impact on crime statistics for years to come.</p> <p>The problem is that a large portion of police departments do not have the NIBRS system, which is expensive and can be difficult to implement into a department. According to the Bureau of Statistics, it</p>

could cost [up to](#) \$377,000 for a department to switch over to NIBRS and over \$53,000 for annual maintenance. According to the FBI, 63% of [all police agencies](#) in the country are using the NIBRS system; however, many of the big cities, like New York and Los Angeles, don't use NIBRS, which means their crime trends will be completely left out of the FBI's data analysis for 2021, including the annual reports.

"The absence of the two largest cities in the country begs the question as to what kind of confidence the public should have in the numbers produced by the FBI," Rick Rosenfeld, a criminologist at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, says. "This is a time period in which we really want to know what's happening with respect to the most serious crimes. The uncertainties around the data are going to make definitive conclusions very difficult to draw."

The FBI did not respond to a request for comment on the criticism of their collecting process and releasing the information.

Crime, particularly homicide, has been a noteworthy issue since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Homicide numbers [increased](#) by [29%](#) in 2020, per the FBI's own report last year, which used UCR numbers. The [increase slowed](#) a bit in 2021 but many cities still experienced a record number of [killings](#). But the lack of concrete data can make it difficult to accurately assess what is happening. In addition to the problems presented by cities that have not yet adopted NIBRS, some experts also believe that the FBI could better handle the data it *does* have. The new system allows for details of incident-by-incident reporting, but the Bureau aggregates it before making it public. Some believe it would make more sense for the FBI to just put out the raw data that they receive. (That is, instead of releasing the total number of homicides from a city, they would release the details of each particular incident.)

"I think if they release the full data it'd be really useful. COVID has shown us that [crime trends](#) change very quickly," Kaplan says. "If they just release the detailed data every quarter that'd be better than having to wait for aggregated data that just shows us the number of crimes in big population groups."

Crime is [expected](#) to be a focal point for the midterm elections and whatever the FBI's data looks like, it will likely be a reference point for decision-makers and voters.

"[Crime data] influences policies, it influences politics. Most importantly it influences people's perceptions of their community and other communities. Millions of dollars are doled out every year to support a whole variety of criminal justice programs," Rosenfeld says. "We should have a firmer understanding of the data."

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HEADLINE	03/31 Arrest: NSA worker disclosed secret info
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-wa/2022/03/31/nsa-secrets-disclosure-indictment/
GIST	<p>An employee of the National Security Agency was indicted Tuesday for allegedly using a personal email account to illegally send classified information to a woman in private industry, federal authorities said.</p> <p>The indictment, unsealed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Baltimore, alleges that Mark Unkenholz, 60, who worked in an NSA office that engages with private industry, sent 13 unauthorized emails to the woman from February 2018 to June 2020, each containing "information relating to national defense" that was classified either "secret" or "top secret/sensitive compartmented information."</p> <p>Unkenholz, of Hanover, Md., was arrested Thursday, according to the U.S. attorney's office in Maryland. He was charged with 13 counts each of willful transmission of national defense information and willful retention of national defense information. Federal court records did not indicate whether Unkenholz is represented by a lawyer.</p> <p>The nature of the material that he allegedly emailed is not disclosed in the indictment, and it is unclear whether the woman, identified in court documents only as "R.F.," has been charged in the case. In announcing the indictment, the U.S. attorney's office provided only a bare-bones account of what</p>

allegedly occurred. Marcia Murphy, a spokeswoman for the office, said authorities had no additional comment.

The unidentified woman had top secret/sensitive compartmented information clearance while working for a private company from about April 2016 to about June 2019, the indictment says, but from about July 2019 to about January 2021, while working for a different company, she “did not hold a security clearance.”

Even when she had top secret/sensitive compartmented information clearance, authorities said, she was not authorized to receive the information that Unkenholz allegedly sent to her on her company email addresses.

Appearing Thursday before Chief Magistrate Judge Beth Gesner, Unkenholz pleaded not guilty to all the charges and was ordered released after promising to show up for future court proceedings. The judge ruled that he is financially eligible for representation by the federal public defender’s office, which said he has not yet been assigned an attorney.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Turkey prosecutor: drop Khashoggi case
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/middleeast/turkey-khashoggi-trial-saudi-arabia.html
GIST	<p>ISTANBUL — A Turkish prosecutor said on Thursday that his country should drop its case against suspects in the killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, bowing to a demand from Saudi Arabia as Turkey tries to mend relations with the kingdom.</p> <p>The prosecutor told the court hearing the case that it was pointless to continue because none of the 26 accused, all Saudi nationals, is in custody, or even in Turkey, and Turkish law does not allow defendants to be convicted in absentia, the Demiroren news agency reported.</p> <p>The court said it would request an opinion from the Justice Ministry and postponed the next hearing to April 7, according to Reporters Without Borders of Turkey and Mr. Khashoggi’s fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, who was present in court.</p> <p>Mr. Khashoggi, a Saudi citizen who wrote opinion columns for The Washington Post, had been critical of his country’s crown prince and de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman. He went to the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 to obtain documents allowing him to marry Ms. Cengiz.</p> <p>He was murdered and dismembered inside the Saudi consulate by Saudi agents who had flown there explicitly to kill him and then quickly returned to Saudi Arabia, according to the Turkish and Western governments. U.S. intelligence agencies have concluded that Prince Mohammed himself ordered the killing, and a United Nations investigation found that it had been carefully planned and endorsed by high-level Saudi officials.</p> <p>The Saudi government has denied any involvement by its leaders. Mr. Khashoggi’s remains have never been found.</p> <p>In the weeks after the killing, the Turkish government pursued a calculated media strategy of releasing revelations piecemeal from its investigation into the assassination, including flight records, surveillance video and the Saudis’ use of an elaborate ruse involving a Khashoggi look-alike. The Turks’ approach repeatedly embarrassed the kingdom and forced it to backtrack from denials it had issued.</p> <p>The case heightened tensions between Prince Mohammed and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, who has cast himself as a leader of the kind of democratic and Islamist movements in the Middle East that the Saudi royal family sees as a threat to its rule.</p> <p>Turkish prosecutors had called for life imprisonment for 24 Saudi suspects accused of taking part in the killing, and up to five years in jail for two others accused of concealing evidence, Demiroren reported.</p>

	But on Thursday the prosecutor said the case should be handed over to Saudi Arabia, as that country has demanded. Around the same time, Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, said in an interview with the broadcaster A Haber that there are currently "important steps" being taken to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia.
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HEADLINE	03/31 Everett mayor on crime: 'need for change'
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/the-system-is-broken-everett-mayor-says-change-is-needed-following-killing-of-officer
GIST	<p>EVERETT, Wash. - FOX 13 News spoke with Everett Mayor Cassie Franklin following her state of the city address on Thursday, where she spoke about the crime concerns in her city.</p> <p>She told FOX 13 News the focus of her speech changed after Everett Police Officer Dan Rocha was killed in the line of duty on Friday March 25.</p> <p>Police say 50-year-old convicted felon Richard Rotter shot and killed Rocha.</p> <p>"What people really need to care about is why in the world did a felon have a gun," she said.</p> <p>Franklin says there is a need for change throughout the state.</p> <p>"The system is broken. When the laws at higher level of government are not working in our cities, when courts and systems at a higher level are releasing people or not holding people accountable," said Franklin. "How do we keep our city safe, when we do not have control over what is happening in those higher systems," she added.</p> <p>Franklin says she is working to bring about change by calling for help from those higher levels of government.</p> <p>There is a memorial for Officer Dan Rocha scheduled for Monday, April 4 at 1:00 p.m. at Angel of the Winds Arena in Everett. The service will be open to the public.</p> <p>The official memorial fund was created in partnership with Victim Support Services, Coastal Community Bank and the City of Everett. According to the website, 100% of the funds will honor Officer Rocha and support his family.</p> <p>Everett Police Department's website also offers other ways to donate:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All branches of Coastal Community Bank are accepting donations of checks and cash to the fund. Make checks payable to "VSS-Dan Rocha Memorial" • The City of Everett will accept checks or cash donations at the Clerks Office: • 2930 Wetmore Ave. Suite 1-A Everett, WA. 98201 • Monday through Thursday 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. for walk-ins • By appointment only from 12:00 p.m. through 1:00 p.m. • To schedule an appointment, please call 425-257-8610
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HEADLINE	03/31 Teens house arrest before deadly robbery
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/operation-crime-justice/teenagers-released-on-house-arrest-before-deadly-pot-shot-robbery-in-tacoma-records-show
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — New details reveal what happened in the shooting that killed a beloved Tacoma pot shop worker.</p> <p>KOMO News was first to tell you the teen suspects had been released on house arrest for a different robbery but cut off their ankle bracelets just three days before the robbery at "World of Weed."</p>

They're now accused in nearly a dozen robberies.

We were first to show you surveillance video of teen fugitives Montrell Hatfield, 16, and Marshon Jones, 15, violently and brazenly robbing pot shops around Pierce and King counties.

Police said they are behind at least 10 hold-ups.

Detectives said Hatfield's distinctive limp from a prosthetic leg, and Jones' 'bushy square eyebrows' have been critical in connecting the robberies, including a violent take over at Mary Mart days before the deadly World of Weed shooting.

"They were pushed around, guns pointed in their faces, guns pointed at their heads pushed to the ground," said owner Damien McDivitt. "A lot of them have not been able to come to work."

In the robbery at world of weed, the duo is now charged with the murder of worker Jordan Brown, 29.

Pierce County charging documents said during the hold-up, Hatfield and the victim got into a struggle, and Hatfield's prosthetic leg was even exposed during the tussle.

Then police said while they were on the ground, Jones fired a shot and the bullet hit Jordan in the neck. He died.

"Anyone involved in a crime—especially one like robbery or family members of victims, they're touched forever," said Officer Wendy Haddow with the Tacoma Police Department. "Their lives are altered forever and our goal is to apprehend these two safely, so they are safe, and the public is safe."

KOMO News first told you in February, the teenagers were arrested in a violent Federal Way pawn shop robbery, but judges released them and put them on house arrest despite prosecutors objecting.

Three days before the World of Weed robbery, they cut off their ankle bracelets.

"This is a terrible tragedy and judges can't see the future.," said Casey McNerthney with the King County Prosecutor's Office. "They have hard decisions. What we can do is what we did, and we'll keep doing is when people use guns in crimes go to court and say this is our serious concern to public safety."

While the teens stay on the run, the victims hope for justice.

"Shame on the system for allowing this to continue," McDivitt said. "That means there were people who were victims of violent crime in Tacoma that was totally preventable."

Police said he suspects might be teens, but they are considered armed and dangerous.

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HEADLINE	03/31 Olympia: officers stabbed attempting arrest
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/olympia-officers-stabbed-making-arrest/281-20f6a709-dc50-48e9-80fa-1fb90d617d32
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. — Two Olympia police officers were stabbed while attempting to make an arrest Thursday evening.</p> <p>One officer shot at the suspect, a man believed to be in his 70s, according to the Olympia Police Department. The suspect was airlifted to a hospital in Pierce County in critical condition.</p> <p>One officer is in serious but stable condition. The other has a non-life-threatening wound.</p>

	<p>According to preliminary information, the officers were attempting to arrest the suspect for allegedly lighting his neighbor's door on fire at the Fern Ridge Apartments in Olympia.</p> <p>Officers tried to make contact with the suspect, who then used pepper spray on them, according to Sergeant Shannon Barnes with the Lacey Police Department (LPD). LPD is helping to investigate the incident.</p> <p>Officers then got a search warrant for the suspect's apartment and called a designated crisis responder to come help with the suspect, but he did not want to speak with anyone, police said.</p> <p>Officers then entered the apartment and were "ambushed," Barnes said. The suspect stabbed both officers, causing one officer to fire at the suspect.</p> <p>The Capital Metro Independent Investigative Team was called to the scene to conduct an independent investigation.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 King Co. settles jail beating lawsuit for \$3M
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/king-county-pays-3-million-to-settle-lawsuit-filed-by-man-who-was-severely-beaten-in-jail/
GIST	<p>King County will pay \$3 million to settle a lawsuit filed by an incarcerated man who was severely beaten in 2018 by another person in jail who officials knew was dangerous, psychotic and had a long history of attacking his cellmates.</p> <p>Toby Meagher, who himself has a long history of mental illness, suffered a traumatic brain injury, broken bones in his face, damaged facial nerves and broken teeth when he was attacked by Troy Leae (pronounced lee-AYE-ee), who had just been returned to the jail from Western State Hospital where he had assaulted six individuals, including a mental health professional.</p> <p>Evidence showed that the day of the assault, July 15, 2018, jail corrections officers disregarded Meagher's pleas to be moved from his cell after Leae had told him he was going to fight him. Less than an hour later, Meagher, who weighed 145 pounds, was found unconscious in a bloody heap on the cell floor after the 5-foot-10, 300-pound Leae pounded his head against a metal sink, according to documents and grisly photographs contained in the pleadings.</p> <p>According to the lawsuit, the injuries Meagher suffered "exacerbated his mental disorder and have deeply affected his ability to communicate." At the time the lawsuit was filed a year later, his attorneys said he "still struggles to string a sentence together."</p> <p>"He spends much of his time confused and upset, constantly revisiting the attack itself, and plagued by nightmares, insomnia, and paranoid thoughts that center specifically around Mr. Leae and the attack."</p> <p>It is the second seven-figure payout by the county for a jail assault in four months. The county paid \$1.25 million to a man in November after he was attacked and beaten by another incarcerated individual in a "meth-fueled rage."</p> <p>In a statement, King County Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention spokesperson Noah Haglund said, "We deeply regret the injuries that Mr. Meagher suffered, and the impact that this attack has had on Mr. Meagher and his family. We are committed to the safety of everybody in our custody, as well as to our staff and visitors."</p> <p>Haglund noted that mental illness is not a reason to isolate people who are incarcerated as it can exacerbate their problems.</p>

“In light of this incident and others, we have increased the training that Jail Health Services staff receive about sharing appropriate medical information with their DAJD colleagues,” he said.

U.S. District Judge James Robart refused to dismiss the lawsuit or grant the involved corrections officers qualified immunity in 2020, and the county appealed his decision to the 9th Circuit Court, where a panel of three judges upheld Robart’s decision and sent the case back for trial.

According to the pleadings, Meagher was booked into the King County Jail in Seattle in August 2017 after he approached two strangers near a convenience store in Burien, punched the man and threatened them with a knife. It was his 20th arrest and booking.

In jail, he assaulted a guard and was twice sent to Western State Hospital for evaluation and was found to suffer from schizoaffective disorder and other mental illnesses.

“Both evaluations concluded that Mr. Meagher’s mental health symptoms impaired his ability to rationally understand court proceedings and assist his defense,” according to court documents.

Robart, in his order declining to dismiss the charges, noted that Meagher’s history included more than 300 outpatient contacts with mental health providers, numerous civil commitments, and repeated findings of mental incompetence at Western State Hospital.

After he was returned to the jail, he continued to be affected by his illnesses. Three days before the assault, a psychiatrist found he continued to hear voices and suffer delusions.

Even so, he was placed in general population with close security, according to the lawsuit.

The county did not dispute that Leae had a “long history of committing violent, unprovoked attacks” and that he had committed several in the months leading up to his attack on Meagher.

On Aug. 6, 2017, police had taken him to Harborview Medical Center for evaluation after an assault. While there, “Leae, without provocation, repeatedly punched a mental health professional and caused the professional to blackout,” according to Robart’s findings in the case.

After being booked into jail, he was placed in restrictive housing and eventually taken to the “Ultra Security” section of the jail. For the next month, he was isolated from other inmates, and in September was ordered by a judge to undergo evaluation at Western State Hospital, according to court pleadings.

However, that transfer did not happen until January 2018, and in the interim Leae was returned to general population, where in October he assaulted another incarcerated man without provocation, knocking him to the floor and kicking him repeatedly in the head. Leae was returned to “Ultra Security” again, according to court documents.

In January, Leae was taken to Western State Hospital where records show he was involved in six assaults on staff and other patients and became so violent that he was placed in five-point restraints. A February evaluation showed Leae to be psychotic and paranoid with unabated symptoms, and incapable of facing trial for the jail assault the previous October.

After a second judicial commitment to restore his competency, Western State Hospital officials determined Leae could understand the proceedings against him despite his “very psychotic behavior.” He was returned to the King County Jail in April, on medication and placed in general population. Documents provided to the jail by the hospital said his medication regime was crucial to prevent further assaults.

However, documents showed that Leae repeatedly refused to take his medication, and at one point tried to drown himself in a jail toilet. Even so, his security classification was lowered by corrections officials at least twice until he was placed in the cell with Meagher, who had returned from his own competency-restoration trip to Western State on July 2, 2018.

Once bunked together, Meagher repeatedly asked to be moved to another cell, saying he and Leae were not getting along. Another incarcerated man who gave a statement afterward said Meagher “was looking worried ... like he felt like he knew something was going to happen.”

Meagher would later say he tried to get the officers’ attention but was told to “handle it himself.”

“The assault that caused these horrific injuries was not an unpreventable assault by an unpredictable inmate,” attorneys Felix Luna and Tomas Gahan wrote.

Jail officers “locked the mentally ill Mr. Meagher in the same cell as the homicidal Mr. Leae, walled in by cement, steel and glass, a decision that effectively granted Mr. Leae free reign over his vulnerable victim.

“Such conduct, by the very individuals tasked with ensuring Mr. Meagher’s safety within the jail and in light of the foreseeability and preventability of the attack, was far beyond negligence — it was an act of reckless disregard.”

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HEADLINE	03/31 ‘Place network investigations’ strategy
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/place-network-policing-strategy/
GIST	<p>A crime-reduction strategy abandoned by Louisville police after the March 2020 fatal shooting of Breonna Taylor has since spread to other major U.S. cities, gaining favor with police chiefs for its potential to reduce violent crime despite its ties to the case that sparked widespread calls for police reform.</p> <p>In the months preceding the shooting, Louisville officers had studied a model known as “place network investigations.” The then-novel approach pioneered by an academic posited that crime could be curbed if police and other community partners focused on geographic connections in areas plagued by violent crime. It is the latest in a long line of U.S. policing philosophies that have used data to target crime concentrated in small areas known as hot spots.</p> <p>In early 2020, a newly formed Louisville police squad installed cameras and tracking devices to surveil several vacant homes that officers believed were linked to a drug operation, according to a review of city documents. One officer was later fired and accused of lying about some of the evidence used to connect Taylor — who lived over 10 miles away — to her ex-boyfriend’s alleged drug activity.</p> <p>“It was an epic failure on so many levels,” Sam Aguiar, a lawyer who has represented Taylor’s family in litigation against the city over her death, said of the city’s place-based plan. “It was destined to fail from the start.”</p> <p>At the time of Taylor’s death, Louisville was one of three cities to try the strategy. It later scrapped the initiative. Now, at least nine jurisdictions either plan to or have already adopted a similar model, according to a Washington Post review.</p> <p>Tamara Herold, an associate professor at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and the architect of the place network investigations model, said that Taylor’s death should not be viewed as a consequence of the strategy. Louisville officers have said they were inspired by Herold’s research. She said she shared information with them about the strategy, but had no involvement in how they conducted their investigations or the decisions they made.</p> <p>“This particular search warrant resulted in a horrific tragedy. It is not a defining feature of this initiative,” she said. “The defining feature of this particular initiative is really to bring in city resources to remove the need for continuous police enforcement.”</p> <p>In statements provided to The Post, officials from some departments pursuing the strategy have stressed that it has shown great potential to reduce crime.</p>

In Philadelphia, police spokeswoman Jasmine Reilly called the plan “a holistic approach to crime reduction.” In Las Vegas, police spokesman Larry Hadfield said the collaborative effort among city agencies has “substantially reduced gun-related victimization” and has helped direct “resources to our most vulnerable communities.” And in Tucson, Police Chief Chad Kasmar has called it “a comprehensive and meaningful plan to reduce violence,” saying that his department is “a staunch supporter of evidence-based, science-informed policing.”

Studies of Herold’s strategy have so far been limited, but the private investment fund Arnold Ventures has pledged more than \$2 million for training efforts and evaluations of the program in Philadelphia, Las Vegas, Tucson, Ariz., Denver, Wichita, Kan., Baton Rouge, La., and Harris County, Texas. (A Baton Rouge police spokesman said plans for the program were paused in December because of a shortage of officers.)

“Policymakers, mayors and city councils are looking for answers of, ‘How do we sustainably decrease violence?’” said Walter Katz, the vice president for criminal justice at Arnold Ventures.

In Dallas, Police Chief Eddie Garcia said that before he took over the department in 2021, he consulted with criminologists, telling them: “I want to come up with a scientifically based crime-reduction strategy from the best that criminology has to offer.” In 2020, Dallas had ended the year with 251 homicides, its highest count since 2004.

Those discussions led Garcia to turn to place network investigations alongside a traditional hot-spot-policing effort.

“This is not just about making arrests and police proactivity,” he said of the place network strategy. “It’s about lighting, streets, traffic, parks and [recreation], schools, the city attorney’s office and holding landlords accountable — I mean, you name it. It’s a holistic approach about truly trying to invest in that neighborhood and take care of a problem.”

Police chiefs under pressure to quickly reduce crime have long turned to plans prioritizing small areas of a city that account for outsize rates of violence.

One of the earliest uses of hot spots was in Minneapolis in the late 1980s during an experiment co-led by the criminologist David Weisburd. That work identified 110 clusters of addresses with the highest number of calls to police. Officials analyzed the calls to determine the “hottest” times and assigned officers to patrol half of the areas for at least three hours a day. In the end, hot spots with increased patrols reported reductions of between 6 and 13% in the number of calls about crime.

“As opposed to having to just ride around in incoherent ways, have them go to the hot spots,” said Weisburd, a professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, and at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “Let’s use police patrol in a more rational way.”

The success of such early experiments gained notice. The strategy soon took hold in police departments across the country as officials routinely found that a small percentage of city blocks accounted for significant portions of citywide crime numbers.

As the use of hot spots spread, Anthony Braga, now the director of the Crime and Justice Policy Lab in the department of criminology at the University of Pennsylvania, reviewed 78 tests of hot-spot-policing interventions conducted in more than two dozen U.S. cities and in eight countries from 1989 to 2017. He found that nearly 80% of the tests reported “noteworthy crime and disorder reductions.”

In his review, he noted that just 10% of hot-spot studies measured the effects of such policing on community residents. Those that did found little detriment to community and police relations, but Braga noted that some initiatives could lead to more men of color being swept into the criminal justice system — a point also made by critics of such programs.

“Flooding the zone isn’t going to solve the problem of poverty or economic stagnation in certain communities,” said Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a law professor at American University in Washington and author of the book “The Rise of Big Data Policing.”

Ferguson suggested that greater funding of schools and jobs programs would have longer-lasting positive results. “But they’re police chiefs,” he said. “They don’t actually have the tools to do these things, so all they can come up with is an answer that sounds good, which is: ‘Don’t worry. We have a new policing strategy’ — which is really just the old policing strategy with a new name.”

Before taking over the Dallas department last year, Garcia consulted with criminologists at the University of Texas at San Antonio to draft a crime-reduction plan and to oversee an effort to evaluate its results.

The first step would be to divide the city into tens of thousands of grids, about the size of football fields, and to flag roughly the top 50 grids for violent crime. Officers would patrol those areas with greater visibility and, in some grids, use investigative tactics to gather intelligence.

Also within the 29-page plan was the place network investigations model that promised to “identify and disrupt networks of criminogenic places.”

“It’s a relatively new theoretical advance in our understanding of crime and place,” said Michael Smith, a professor in the department of criminology at UTSA. “It’s certainly not been around as long as hot spots policing has been around. But I think it has shown great promise.”

Throughout the new Dallas plan, Garcia cited the research of Herold — whose “place-based investigations of violent offender territories (PIVOT)” model was first used in Cincinnati in 2016 as an experiment to combat gun violence. There, she and police officials developed a scoring system to flag “micro-locations” that were “chronically violent,” according to a summary. The strategy relied heavily on intelligence gathering — surveillance, undercover policing and the use of confidential informants — and leaned on community partners. Drug crime was one factor often driving gun violence, Herold found.

In the Cincinnati experiment, street parking was eliminated after the team concluded that the spaces were used to conceal drug transactions. Streetlights were installed. Blighted buildings were demolished. When investigators examined one residential area used by gang members, they found guns and ammunition hidden in tall grass with children playing nearby. So, they mowed the grass.

From 2015 to 2016, the pilot micro-location program reported a drop of more than 80% in the number of shooting victims. Capt. Matthew Hammer of the Cincinnati Police Department said that the strategy remains effective but that the city, which had a record number of homicides in 2020, has struggled to scale up the program. It is in use in just four locations.

“The amount of resources that it takes to work through some of these challenges and to untangle some of these problems is extraordinary,” Hammer said.

Officials in Louisville had embraced the strategy after high-ranking members of their police department attended a presentation in June 2019 about Herold’s model. In October, they traveled to Cincinnati to observe meetings about the strategy. By December, Louisville had created its own “Place-Based Investigations Squad.”

The goal, according to documents later made public by Louisville, was to “dismantle the entire physical infrastructure, or place networks, used by offenders.” The city planned to use “all city resources” to do so, focusing on areas of chronic violence and then disrupting networks of violence. Then, officials would create “sustainable solutions” for public safety.

By New Year’s Eve, city leaders assigned five officers to the squad and selected its first target: a “microcell” in West Louisville comprising several blocks. In the middle was Elliott Avenue, the site of an increase in aggravated assaults and drug-related crimes.

During a May 2020 interview with the Louisville police department's public integrity unit, then-detective Josh Jaynes described how the squad decided on the location.

"It's like a hot spot," he said.

Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old hospital technician, had no criminal record and lived more than 10 miles outside the "microcell" under police scrutiny. Yet she quickly became ensnared in what Jaynes later said in the investigative interview was "probably one of the bigger casefiles I've ever been a part of."

On Jan. 2, 2020, Louisville police officers installed a camera on a utility pole, pointing the lens west at South 24th Street and Elliott Avenue. Within one hour of the camera's activation, detectives observed as many as 20 cars drive to and from 2424 Elliott Ave. The constant flow of cars there, they noted, was "indicative of narcotics trafficking."

"Just [a] typical trap house," Jaynes remarked in his interview. "People coming and going."

One of the cars spotted was a white 2016 Chevrolet Impala carrying Jamarcus Glover, who had a felony record for selling cocaine in Mississippi. The car was registered to Taylor, his ex-girlfriend, although detectives did not report seeing her in the vehicle that night. In later reports detailing the camera's surveillance, detectives documented one sighting of Taylor with Glover, along with reports of her black Dodge Charger seen "numerous times" in front of the Elliott Avenue home.

On Jan. 3, 2020, police arrested Glover on charges related to guns and drugs recovered from the Elliott Avenue home and two other houses, and he was booked into jail, from where he called Taylor. After his release, the squad installed a GPS tracking device on his car that recorded six trips to 3003 Springfield Dr., Taylor's apartment complex across town. A detective photographed Glover leaving Taylor's apartment with what appeared to be a U.S. Postal Service package in hand.

The squad developed a theory that Glover was using Taylor and her apartment to store his drug money. "They get other people involved, and it's usually females," Jaynes said in his police interview.

In March, Jaynes prepared the request for no-knock warrants to enter 2424 Elliott Ave. and two neighboring houses, along with Taylor's apartment on Springfield Drive. For Taylor's apartment, Jaynes wrote that he had "verified through a U.S. postal inspector that Jamarcus Glover has been receiving packages at 3003 Springfield Drive #4."

Shortly after midnight on March 13, 2020, a Louisville SWAT team raided 2424 Elliott Ave. and recovered "a large amount of suspected crack cocaine and suspected Fentanyl pills" hidden in a bag in a tree in the backyard, along with "other evidence of narcotics trafficking" including a digital scale and large amounts of cash, according to documents. Glover was arrested at the house.

Across town, officers carried out what they have described as a "knock and announce" entry into Taylor's apartment. Her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, opened fire, and police returned fire, fatally shooting Taylor. Walker, a licensed gun owner, has said he heard banging sounds but did not hear any identification — leading him to think the officers were intruders. Officials said officers found no drugs or money in Taylor's apartment.

The revelation that a Louisville officer had been shot in the leg left Jaynes feeling unsettled. "It stinks, because I feel like some of our investigation, I would have done it a little bit differently," he said in the interview with the public integrity unit. "These are our warrants. We all had a hand in this."

The city later agreed to pay Taylor's family \$12 million. Former police officer Brett Hankison was acquitted this month of charges that he endangered three people when he fired through a wall into an adjacent apartment during the raid.

Eleven months after Taylor's death, the Louisville Metro Police Department disbanded the squad dedicated to place-based investigations. Jaynes was fired last year after officials said he had lied on the search warrant affidavit about the claim that he had "verified" through a U.S. postal inspector that Glover received packages at Taylor's apartment complex. Jaynes has sued the department's merit board in an attempt to regain his job.

In an interview with The Post, Jaynes said he did not lie but was instead relying on information conveyed by a fellow officer. "We're still pursuing my appeal in circuit court, and I'm going to fight this until I can't fight no more," he said.

Jaynes, 39, declined to answer questions about the investigative tactics his team used to focus on Taylor and Glover. But he said he believed in the philosophy behind his team's work and disagreed with the decision to end the department's initiative on place based investigations.

"We all had good intentions to implement the strategy and to see results and to see criminal activity decrease," he said.

The department declined to make Police Chief Erika Shields available for an interview.

"Place Based Investigations (PBI) was a hot-spot-policing strategy intended to help focus limited resources in specific high-crime areas. It is no longer in existence," said a statement issued by a department spokeswoman. "The Criminal Interdiction Unit, which oversaw the initiative, was revamped under Chief Shields's administration to align with current intelligence-led policing practices focusing on illegal guns and violent offenders — knowing 'who' you are looking for and 'why' rather than 'where.'"

Herold has said that Louisville's attempt to implement her strategy was not fully formed because it had not adopted the core tenet of her program: a board of citywide partners working together to address issues in the places under scrutiny.

Although there was no board in place, emails later released by the city show that the efforts to confront crime on Elliott Avenue extended beyond the police department. In early 2020, a Louisville code enforcement officer emailed detectives assigned to the squad, discussing nuisance orders related to criminal activity at 2424 Elliott Ave. Months after Taylor's death, the city took ownership of the property.

Aguiar, meanwhile, said he is "absolutely" certain that Taylor would be alive if the Louisville department had not embarked on a place-focused strategy. He said the effort was a misguided attempt to gentrify blighted neighborhoods under the guise of fighting crime — a claim disputed by city leaders.

"They should have never been at Breonna Taylor's house that night," he said. "And the only reason they were is because you had five detectives that were given such a minor task that had to consume 40 hours of their workweek and became their life. They just became obsessive over it."

Back in Dallas, Garcia has a go-to phrase to sum up his long-term vision: weeding and seeding.

"We need to weed the criminal element that's responsible for violent crime," he said. "But we're also trying to seed those same areas with positivity. And that's part of the plan that I hope doesn't get missed."

Dallas officials, citing security concerns, have not publicly identified the roughly 50 hot spot grids or the two locations in which they are testing the broader place network investigations strategy. But The Post was allowed to observe the hot spot strategy in a handful of locations last fall.

Within the grids, opinions from community members ranged from anger to ambivalence, and in some cases, cautious praise.

In southwest Dallas, the hub of Grid No. 6913 is the Super 7 Inn — a long-term-stay motel that police officials say has been plagued by violent crime. One night last fall, an officer in an unmarked car entered

license plate numbers of nearby cars into an electronic system — looking for stolen vehicles or other violations. Officers in a marked cruiser soon pulled over a Dodge Charger with an expired registration tag and arrested the driver for outstanding warrants on traffic tickets. A small amount of marijuana was recovered, but officers said the quantity did not meet the threshold for criminal charges.

Two passengers in the car, who were released without being charged with a crime, criticized the policing tactics used in the area.

“They’re not going to protect us,” said Marquez Penagraph, a 22-year-old Black college student. “Ain’t no African American, male or female, thinking they’ve got police help. I guarantee you — they are not.”

Across the street, a small group of men watched from a grassy field as police swarmed the area during the stop.

“This is an area of high crime and high drugs,” said Christopher Middleton, 37, a long-term resident of the Super 7 Inn. “If nobody wasn’t doing nothing, [the police] are not gonna be here, right?”

Across the city, in Grid No. 46649, a stretch of rundown houses on Hamilton Avenue had been flagged by police as one of the city’s most violent areas. One house, painted blue, was boarded up. Three women sat on a bed of blankets and pillows on the porch, playing dominoes.

Lauthasal Langley, 45, said that for the past few months, she has used the porch as a place to sleep and keep an eye on her two friends.

“They think that every time that they see a group of Black folks together, it has to be some drugs going on, or a crime going on,” she said, pointing at the nearby Dallas police officers. “No. We just like to hang out. This is what we do.”

In a command staff meeting in October, police leaders described evidence of an illegal drug operation within the block of Hamilton Avenue. One official suggested that the next step to address the house where Langley and her friends live would be to work with city code enforcement to declare it uninhabitable and possibly tear it down.

Garcia said the place network investigations strategy aims to provide assistance to people such as Langley by coordinating services from multiple city agencies, including the Office of Homeless Solutions.

“Solving a problem isn’t necessarily arresting people,” Garcia said.

At the end of the year, homicides were down by 13%, against a 5% increase in homicide numbers in major cities nationwide. Dallas officials also reported a citywide 9% decrease in violent crime from the previous year.

Smith, the criminologist guiding Dallas’s plan, said the crime reduction program is working. Grids that were prioritized in the fall showed a nearly 53% reduction in violent crime from the three-month period before the experiment began, according to summary data. Grids that did not receive enhanced policing recorded only a 12% decrease.

And although Smith says he thinks policing efforts within the grids probably drove the citywide decrease in violent crime, he does not yet have the data analysis to prove it.

“Can I as a scientist draw a direct causal line? At this point, no,” said Smith. “This is not a lab. This is the real world. You can’t control for any input that could have contributed to a crime drop.”

Critics caution that any police-gathered data should be viewed with the highest level of scrutiny because of the danger of confirmation bias.

	<p>“The data that they have about where crimes are committed and by whom is all based on police decisions about where and how to collect the information,” said Carl Takei, a senior staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union. “And so it often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that the police will focus a great deal of resources on certain Black and Brown neighborhoods.”</p> <p>Back in Grid 6913, at the Super 7 Inn, Middleton and his partner, Brittney, have lived at the motel since last summer. The sound of gunfire from a drive-by shooting across the street in January left the couple and their two young children feeling rattled. But Middleton said they have felt safer because of the hot-spot-policing effort.</p> <p>“This motel complex used to have a lot of unsavory characters,” he said. “The dope dealers, they’re gone. Either they were arrested or they got smart and left.”</p> <p>Deputy Chief Richard Foy, who oversees the police department’s South Central and Southwest divisions, proudly credits the officers who patrol hot spots such as Grid 6913. He calls them his “crime-fighters” — a superhero-like reference to the men and women working the high-priority shifts.</p> <p>“On violent crime, we kicked ass,” Foy said on New Year’s Eve as he analyzed numbers on his work computer. “Just because we have a successful year doesn’t mean that we’re done. In a perfect world, crime is zero.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Missing, murdered Indigenous alert system
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article259985260.html
GIST	<p>An alert system for missing or murdered Indigenous women and people was officially signed into law Thursday, making it the first such system of its kind in the country.</p> <p>House Bill 1725 was introduced during the legislative session by Rep. Debra Lekanoff, D-Bow. Currently the only Native American serving in the state legislature, Lekanoff is Tlingit and Aleut, and is part of the Missing, Murdered and Indigenous Women and People task force, a workgroup created by the Attorney General’s Office in August.</p> <p>Her bill passed both chambers of the legislature unanimously.</p> <p>The bill signing took place at Tulalip Casino and was hosted by the Tulalip Tribes.</p> <p>“I am proud to say that the missing and murdered Indigenous women’s and people’s alert system came from the voices of our Native American leaders, it came from the broadcasters, it came from the Washington citizens...” Lekanoff said.</p> <p>Lekanoff said missing and murdered Indigenous people are not just an “Indian issue” or responsibility.</p> <p>“The missing and murdered Indigenous women’s bill does something as simple as this,” Lekanoff added. “...it removes the hand so we can hear the unheard screams.” The alert system is similar to Amber Alerts or Silver Alerts, where information about missing persons is shown on highway signs and information is distributed to local media outlets and via text message.</p> <p>According to a study by the Urban Indian Health Institute, which researched 506 cases in several cities around the country, Seattle has the highest rate of murdered Indigenous women and people in the country, while Tacoma has the highest number of missing Indigenous women and people. The study also showed that Indigenous women are more than four times as likely as white women to go missing in the state.</p> <p>Overall, Washington has the second highest rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women in the U.S.</p>

	<p>Attorney General Bob Ferguson, who attended the signing, said that other state attorneys general have already reached out to him about the alert system, and that they hope to implement something similar in their states.</p> <p>Gov. Jay Inslee also signed a tribal consultation bill, after the governor spent the second half of 2021 working with Washington tribes to craft the measure. The bill was requested by the governor's office and was also sponsored by Lekanoff.</p> <p>He was joined by several local tribal leaders during the signing including Glen Gobin, Tulalip Tribes Vice Chairman, Teri Gobin, Tulalip Tribes Chairwoman, and Leonard Forsman, Suquamish Chairman and President of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians.</p> <p>The legislation requires state agencies to consult with tribes about how they plan to spend money from the Climate Commitment Act, which passed the legislature last year.</p> <p>Agencies also must provide transparency to tribes about how resources and rights would be impacted. Inslee said the bill "helps us accomplish our shared goals to build clean energy, support resilient ecosystems, and maintain healthy salmon populations in the face of climate change."</p>
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HEADLINE	04/01 Germany charges 4: major child porn site
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/german-prosecutors-file-charges-major-child-porn-site-83805269
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- German prosecutors said Friday they have filed charges against four men over their alleged involvement with a major international platform for child pornography that was taken down last year.</p> <p>Investigators say the "BoysTown" platform, which operated on the darknet, had more than 400,000 members. Pedophiles used it to exchange and watch pornography of children and toddlers, most of them boys, from all over the world. It was shut down in April 2021.</p> <p>The suspects are aged between 41 and 65, Frankfurt prosecutors said in a statement. Their names weren't released, in keeping with German privacy rules. They face charges that include spreading and producing child pornography and sexual abuse of children.</p> <p>Two of the men are accused of building the platform in 2019. One of them also allegedly sexually abused two children. The other was extradited in October from Paraguay, where he had lived for a few years.</p> <p>A third suspect is accused of acting as an administrator and moderator for the platform as well as sexually abusing two children. Prosecutors say that the fourth man was "one of the most active users" of the platform. All four are in custody.</p> <p>The Frankfurt state court now has to decide whether the case will go to trial and if so when. Prosecutors said investigations of other suspected members of the platform are continuing.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/31 Germany: 6 arrests; grid sabotage plot
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/germany-6-men-held-in-alleged-plan-to-sabotage-power-lines/2022/03/31/174ad40a-b111-11ec-9dbd-0d4609d44c1c_story.html
GIST	<p>BERLIN — Authorities in Germany said Thursday they have detained six men on suspicion of planning to sabotage overhead power lines in order to disrupt the country's electricity supply.</p> <p>Police said hundreds of officers on Wednesday raided apartments that were linked to the men in the southeastern town of Neumarkt. Officers found several illegal guns and rifles, as well as tens of thousands of rounds of ammunition, police said.</p>

	<p>Bavaria state police said the behavior of the suspects, who range in age from 34 to 59, indicated they belonged to the “prepper” scene - a loose movement of people who believe in preparing for societal collapse.</p> <p>“There have so far been no concrete indications of terrorist motivations or a terrorist organization,” police said.</p> <p>Bavaria’s top security official, Joachim Herrmann, said the police operation had dealt “a sore blow to a group with reckless and anti-constitutional aims.”</p> <p>“Thanks to resolute police work, planned acts of sabotage on major power lines were successfully prevented,” he said.</p>
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